NAMELESS RIVER

VINGIE E. ROE

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NAMELESS RIVER

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BY

VINGIE E. ROE

Author of "Tharon of Lost Valley," "Val of Paradise," etc.

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NAMELESS RIVER

CHAPTER I

"FIGHT FOR A WOMAN? HELL! IF 'TWAS TH' HORSE NOW——"

It was Springtime in the Deep Heart country. On the broad slopes, the towering slants of the hills themselves, the connifers sang their everlasting monotone, tuned by the little winds from the south.

On the flaring fringes of their sweeping skirts where the streams ran, maples trembled in the airy sun and cottonwoods shook their thousand palms of silver.

Great cañons cut the ridges, dark and mysterious, murmuring with snow water, painted fantastically in the reds and browns and yellows of their weathered stone. Pine trees grew here, and piñons, hemlock and spruce, all the dark and sombre people of the forest, majestic and aloof.

But in the sweet valleys that ran like playful fingers all ways among the hills, where lay tender grass of a laughing brightness, flowers nodded thick in the drowsy meadows. It was

a lonesome land, set far from civilization, but beautiful withal, serene, silent, wild with crag and peak and precipice. Deer browsed in its sheltered places, a few timber wolves preyed on them, while here and there a panther screamed to the stars at night.

For many years a pair of golden eagles had reared their young on the beetling escarpment that crowned Mystery Ridge.

It was a rich land, too, for many cattle ran on its timbered slants and grew sleek and fat for fall along the reaches of the river.

On a day when all the world seemed basking in the tempered sun, a horse and rider came down along the slopes heading toward the west. On the broad background of this primeval setting they made a striking picture, one to arrest the eye, for both were remarkable. Of the two, perhaps the horse would first have caught the attention of an observer, owing to its great stature and its shining mouse-blue coat.

Far off, also, the prideful grace of its carriage, the lightness, the arrogance of its step, would have been noticeable. But as they drew near, one looked instinctively to see what manner of rider bestrode so splendid a fellow, and was not disappointed—for the rider was a woman.

She was a gallant woman, if one could so describe her, not large but built with such nicety

of line, of proportion, as best to show off the spirit in her—and that was a thing which might not be described. Under her sombrero, worn low on her brow and level, one got the seeming of darkness shot with fire—the black eyes and bit of dusky hair above cheeks brightly flushed. She rode at ease, her gauntleted hands clasped on her pommel, her reins swinging. A blue flannel shirt, gay with pearl buttons, lay open at the throat and bloused a trifle above a broad leather belt, well worn and studded with nickel spots. A divided skirt of dark leather, precisely fitted and deeply fringed at the bottom, concealed the tops of high laced boots. All her clothing betokened especial make, and very thorough wear.

As the blue horse sidled expertly down the slope a loose stone turned under his shod hoof, causing him to stumble ever so slightly, though he caught himself instantly.

As instantly the woman's spurred heel struck his flank, her swift tightening of the rein anticipated his resultant start.

"Pick up your feet, you!" she said sharply, frowning.

The stallion did pick up his feet, for he was intelligent, but he shook his proud head, laid his ears back on his neck, and the sweat started on his sensitive skin at the needless rake of the spur. The great dark eyes in his grey-blue face shone

for a time like fox-fire in the dark, twin sparks beneath the light of his tossing silver forelock.

He choose his footing more carefully, though he was an artist in hill climbing at all times, for the woman on his back was a hard task-master. Caught as a colt in the high meadows of the Upper Country beyond the Deep Heart hills, the horse had served her faithfully for four of his seven years of life, and hated her sullenly. There was mixed blood in his veins—wild, from the slim white mother who had never felt a rope, patrician, gentle, tractable, from the thoroughbred black father lost from a horse-trader's string eleven years back and sought for many bootless moons because of his great value.

Swayed by the instincts of these two strains the superb animal obeyed this woman who was unquestionably his master, though rebellion surged in him at every chastisement.

The sun was at the zenith, marking the time of short shadows, and its light fell in pale golden washes over the tapestried green slopes. Tall flowers nodded on slim stalks in nook and crevasse—frail columbine and flaming bleeding hearts—and mosses crept in the damp places.

For an hour the two came down along the breast of a ridge, dropping slowly in a long diagonal, and presently came out on a bold shoulder that jutted from the parent spine. Here, with the thinning trees falling abruptly

away, a magnificent view spread out below. For a long time there had been in the rider's ears a low and heavy murmur, a ceaseless sound of power. Now its source was visible—the river that wound between wide meadows spread like flaring flounces on either side—broad, level, green stretches that looked rich as a king's lands, and were.

The woman reined up her horse and sitting sidewise looked down with moody eyes. A frown drew close the dark brows under the hat brim, the full sensuous lips hardened into a tight line.

Hatred flamed in her passionate face, for the smiling valley was tenanted. At the far edge of the green floor across the river there nestled against the hills that rose abruptly the small log buildings of a homestead. There was a cabin, squarely built and neat, a stable, a shed or two, and stout corrals, built after the fashion of a stockade, their close-set upright saplings gleaming faintly in the light.

And on the green carpet a long brown line lay stretched from end to end, straight as a plumb-line, attesting to the accuracy of the eye that drew it. A team of big bay horses even now plodded along that line, leaving behind them a tiny addition in the form of a flange of new turned earth, the resistless effect of the conquering plow.

The plow, hated of all those who follow the fringe of the wilderness, savage, trapper, and cattleman.

In the furrow behind walked the owner of the accurate eyes—deep, wide, blue eyes they were, set beautifully apart under calm brows of a golden bronze which matched exactly the thick lashes and the heavy rope of hair braided and pinned around the head hidden in an old-fashioned sunbonnet—for this only other figure in the primeval picture was a woman also. She was young by the grace of the upright carriage, strong by the way she handled her plow, confident in every movement, every action. She stood almost as tall as the average man, and she walked with the free swing of one.

For a long time the rider on the high shoulder of the ridge sat regarding these tiny plodders in the valley.

Then she deliberately took from its straps the rifle that hung on her saddle, lifted it to her shoulder, took slow aim and fired. It was a high-power gun, capable of carrying much farther than this point of aim, and its bullet spat whiningly into the earth so near the moving team that one of the horses jumped and squatted.

The woman lowered the gun and watched.

But the upright figure plodding in its furrow never so much as turned its head. It merely

pulled the lines buckled about its waist, thereby steadying the frightened horse back to its business, and crept ahead at its plowing.

"Damn!" said the woman.

She laid the rifle across her pommel, reined the blue stallion sharply away and went on her interrupted journey.

Two hours later she rode into the shady, crooked lane that passed for a street in Cordova. Composed of a general store, a blacksmith-shop, a few ancient cabins, the isolated trading point called itself a town. McKane of the store did four-ply business and fancied himself exceedingly.

As the woman came cantering down the street between the cabins he ceased whittling on the splinter in his hands and watched her. She was well worth watching, too, for she was straight as an Indian and she rode like one. Of the half dozen men lounging on the store porch in the drowsy afternoon, not one but gazed at her with covetous eyes.

A light grew up in McKane's keen face, a satisfaction, an appreciation, a recognition of excellence.

"By George!" he said softly. "Boys, I don't know which is the most worth while—the half-breed Bluefire or Kate Cathrew on his back!"

"I'll take the woman," said a lean youth in

worn leather, his starved young face attesting to the womanless wilderness of the Upper County from whence he hailed. "Yea, Lord—I'll take the woman."

"You mean you *would*," said McKane, smiling, "if you could. Many a man has tried it, but Kate rides alone. Yes, and rules her kingdom with an iron hand—that's wrong—it's steel, and Toledo steel at that, tempered fine. And merciless."

"You seem to know th' lady pretty well."

"All Nameless River knows her," said the trader, lowering his voice as she drew near, "and the Deep Hearts, too, as far as cattle run."

"Take an' keep yer woman—if ye can—" put in a bearded man of fifty who sat against a post, his booted feet stretched along the floor, "but give me th' horse. I've loved him ever sence I first laid eyes on him two years back.

"He's more than a horse—he's got brains behind them speakin' eyes, soft an' black when he's peaceful, but burnin' like coals when he's mad. I've seen him mad, an' itched to own him then. Kate's a brute to him—don't understand him, an' don't want to."

McKane dropped his chair forward and rose quickly to his feet as the woman cantered up.

"Hello, Kate," he said, as she sat a moment regarding the group, "how's the world at Sky Line Ranch?"

"All there," she said shortly, "or was when I left."

She swung out of her saddle and flung her reins to the ground. She pulled off her gloves and pushed the hat back from her forehead, which showed sweated white above the tan of her face. She passed into the store with McKane, the spurs rattling on her booted heels.

Left alone the big, blue stallion turned his alert head and looked at the men on the porch, drawing a deep breath and rolling the wheel in his half-breed bit.

It was as the bearded man had said—intelligence in a marked degree looked out of the starry eyes in the blue face. That individual reached out a covetous hand, but the horse did not move. He knew his business too well as Kate Cathrew's servant.

Inside the store the woman took two letters which McKane gave her from the dingy pigeonholes that did duty as post office, read them, frowned and put them in the pocket of her leather riding skirt. Then she selected a few things from the shelves which she stowed in a flour-sack and was ready to go. McKane followed her close, his eyes searching her face with ill-concealed desire. She did not notice the men on the porch, who regarded her frankly, but passed out among them as though they were not there. It was this cool insolence which cleared

the path before her wherever she appeared, as if all observers, feeling the inferiority her disdain implied, acknowledged it.

But as she descended the five or six steps that led down from the porch, she came face to face with a newcomer, one who neither gaped nor shifted back, but looked her square in the face.

This was a man of some thirty-four or five, big, brawny, lean and fit, of a rather homely countenance lighted by grey eyes that read his kind like print.

He looked like a cattleman save for one thing —the silver star pinned to the left breast of his flannel shirt, for this was Sheriff Price Selwood.

"Good day, Kate," he said.

A red flush rose in the woman's face, but it was not set there by any liking for the speaker who accosted her, that was plain.

"It's never a good day when I meet you," she said evenly, "it's a bad one."

The Sheriff smiled.

"That's good," he answered, "but some day I'll make it better."

McKane, his own face flushed with sudden anger, stepped close.

"Price," he said thinly, "you and I've been pretty fair friends, but when you talk to Miss Cathrew like that, you've got me to settle with. That sounded like a threat."

"Did it?" said Selwood. "It was."

The trader was as good as his word.

With the last syllable his fist shot out and took the speaker in the jaw, a clean stroke, timed a half-second sooner than the other had expected, though he *had* expected it. It snapped his head back on his shoulders, but did not make him stagger, and the next moment he had met McKane half-way with all the force of his two hundred pounds of bone and muscle.

In the midst of the whirlwind fight that followed, Kate Cathrew, having pulled on her gloves and coolly tied her sack in place on her saddle, mounted Bluefire and rode away without a backward look.

Twenty minutes later the Sheriff picked up the trader and rolled him up on the porch. He stood panting himself, one hand on the worn planking, the other wiping the blood and dirt from his face.

"Get some water, boys," he said quietly, "and when he comes around tell him I'll be back tomorrow for my coffee and tobacco—five pounds of each—and anything more he wants to give me."

He picked up his wide hat, brushed it with his torn sleeve, set it back on his head precisely. walked to his own horse, which was tied some distance away, mounted and rode south toward the more open country where his own ranch lay.

"I'm damned!" said the bearded man softly,

"it didn't take her long to stir up somethin' on a peaceful day! If it'd ben over Bluefire, now—there's somethin' to fight for—but a woman; Hell!"

"But—Glory—Glory!" whispered the lean boy who had watched Kate hungrily, "ain't she worth it! Oh, just ain't she! Wisht I was McKane this minute!"

"Druther be th' Sheriff," said the other enigmatically.

CHAPTER II

THE HOMESTEAD ON NAMELESS

When the sun dropped over the western ridge, the girl in the deep sunbonnet unhitched her horses from the plow. She looped her lines on the hames, rubbed each sweated bay head a moment, carefully cleaned her share with a small wooden paddle which she took from a pocket in her calico skirt, and tipped the implement over, share-face down.

Then she untied the slatted bonnet and took it off, carrying it in her hand as she swung away with her team at her heels, and the change was marvelous. Where had been a somewhat masculine figure, plodding at man's work a few moments before, was now a young goddess striding the virgin earth.

The rose glow of coming twilight in the mountains bathed the stern slants with magic, fell on her bronze head like ethereal dust of gems. All in a moment she had become beautiful. The golden shade of her smooth skin was but a tint above that of her hair and brows and lashes, a blend to delight an artist, so rare was it—though her mother said they were "all off

the same piece." There was red in her make-up, too, faint, thinned, beneath the light tan of her cheeks, flaming forth brightly in the even line of her full lips.

Out of this flare of noonday color her blue eyes shone like calm waters under summer skies. Some of the men of the country had seen John Allison's daughter, but not one of them would have told you she was handsome—for not one of them had seen her without the disfiguring shelter of the bonnet. She went with the weary horses to the edge of the river, flat here in the broad meadows, and stood between them as they drank.

She raised her head and looked across the swift water-stream to the high shoulder of the distant ridge, but there was no fear in the calm depths of her eyes. She stood so, quiet, tired, at ease, until the horses had drunk their fill and with windy breaths of satisfaction were ready to go on across the flat to the stable and corral.

Here she left them in the hands of a boy of seventeen, very much after her own type, but who walked with a hopeless halt, and went on to the cabin.

"Hello, Mammy," she said, smiling—and if she had been beautiful before she was exquisite when she smiled, for the red lips curled up at the corners and the blue eyes narrowed to drowsy slits of sweetness

But there was no answering smile on the gaunt face of the big woman who met her at the door with work-hardened hands laid anxiously on her young shoulders.

"Nance, girl," she said straightly, "I heard a shot this afternoon—I reckon it whistled some out there in th' field?"

"It did," said Nance honestly, "so close it made Dan squat."

In spite of her courage the woman paled a bit.

"My Lord A'mighty!" she said distressedly, "I do wish your Pappy had stayed in Missouri! I make no doubt he'd been livin' today—and I'd not be eating my heart out with longin' for him, sorrow over Bud, an' fear for you every time you're out of my sight. And th' land ain't worth it."

But Nance Allison laid her hand over her mother's and turned in the doorway to look once again at the red and purple veils of dusk-haze falling down the mountain's face, to listen to the song of Nameless River, hurrying down from the mysterious cañons of the Deep Heart hills, and a sort of adoring awe irradiated her features.

"Worth it?" she repeated slowly. "No—not Papp's death—not Bud's lameness—but worth every lick of work I ever can do, worth every glorious hour I spend on it, worth every bluff I

call, every sneak-thief enemy I defy—and some day it will be worth a mint of gold when the cattle grow to herds. And in the meantime it's —why, Mammy, it's the anteroom of Heaven, the fringes of paradise, right here in Nameless Valley."

The mother sighed.

"You love it a lot, don't you?" she asked plaintively.

"I think it's more than love," said the big girl slowly as she rolled her faded sleeves higher along her golden arms preparatory to washing at the well in the yard, "I think it's principle—a proving of myself—I think it's a front line in the battle of life—and I believe I'm a mighty fighter."

"I know you are," said the woman with conviction, faintly tinged with pride, "but—there'll be few cattle left for herds if things go on the way they have gone. Perhaps there'll be neither herds nor herders——"

But her daughter interrupted.

"There'll be a fight, at any rate," she said as she plunged her face, man fashion, into the basin filled with water from the bucket which she had lifted, hand over hand—"there'll be a fight to the finish when I start—and some day I'm afraid I'll start."

She looked at her mother with a shade of trouble on her frank face.

"For two years," she added, "I've been turning the other cheek to my enemies. I haven't passed that stage, yet. I'm still patient—but I feel stirrings."

"God forbid!" said the older woman solemnly, "it sounds like feud!"

"Will be," returned the girl shortly, "though I pray against it night and day."

The boy Bud came up from the stable along the path, and Nance stood watching him. There was but one thing in Nameless Valley that could harden her sweet mouth, could break up the habitual calm of her eyes. This was her brother, Bud.

When she regarded him, as she did now, there was always a flash of flame in her face, a wimple of anguish passing on her features, an explosion, as it were, of some deep and surging passion, covered in, hidden, like molten lava in some half-dead crater, its dull surface cracking here and there with seams of awful light which drew together swiftly. Now for the moment the little play went on in her face.

Then she smiled, for he was near.

"Hello, Kid," she said, "how's all?"

The boy smiled back and he was like her as two peas are like each other—the same golden skin, the same mouth, the same blue eyes crinkling at the corners.

But there the likeness ended, for where Nance

was a delight to the eye in her physical perfection, the boy hung lopsided, his left shoulder drooping, his left leg grotesquely bandied.

But the joy of life was in him as it was in Nance, despite his misfortune.

"Whew!" he said, "it's gettin' warm a-ready. Pretty near melted working in th' garden today. Got three beds ready. Earth works up fine as sand."

"So it does in the field," said Nance as she followed the mother into the cabin, "it's like mould and ashes and all the good things of the land worked in together. It smells as fresh as they say the sea winds smell. Each time I work it, it seems wilder and sweeter—old lady earth sending out her alluring promise."

"Land sakes, girl," said Mrs. Allison, "where do you get such fancies!"

"Where do you suppose?" said Nance, "out of the earth herself. She tells me a-many things here on Nameless—such as the value of patience, an' how to be strong in adversity. I've never had the schools, not since those long-back days in Missouri, but I've got my Bible and I've got the land. And I've got the sky and the hills and the river, too. If a body can't learn from them he's poor stuff inside. Mighty poor."

She tidied her hair before the tiny mirror that hung on the kitchen wall, a small matter of passing her hands over the shining mass, for the

braids were smooth, almost as they had been when she pinned them there before sun-up, and rolling down her sleeves, sat down to the table where a simple meal was steaming. She bowed her head and Mrs. Allison, her lean face gaunt with shadows of fear and apprehension, folded her hard hands and asked the customary blessing of that humble house.

Humble it was in every particular—of its scant furnishings, of its bare cleanliness which was its only adornment, of the plain food on the scoured, clothless table.

These folk who lived in it were humble, too, if one judged only by their toil-scarred hands, their weary faces.

But under the plain exterior there was something which set them apart, which defied the stamp of commonplace, which bid for the extraordinary.

This was the dominant presence of purpose in the two younger faces, the spirit of patient courage which shone naked from the two pairs of blue eyes.

The mother had less of it.

She was like a war-mother of old—waiting always with a set mouth and eyes scanning the distances for tragedy.

That living spirit of stubborn courage had come out of the heart and soul of John Allison, latter day pioneer, who for two years had slept

in a low, neat bed at the mountain's foot beyond the cabin, his end one of the mysteries of the wild land he had loved. His wife had never ceased to fret for its unravelling, to know the how and wherefore of his fall down Rainbow Cliff—he, the mountaineer, the sure, the unchancing. His daughter and son had accepted it, laid it aside for the future to deal with, and taken up the work which he had dropped—the plow, the rope and the cattle brand.

It was heavy work for young hands, young brains.

The great meadow on the other side of Nameless was rich in wild grass, a priceless possession. For five years it had produced abundant stacks to feed the cattle over, and the cutting and stacking was work that taxed the two to the very limit of endurance. And the corn-land at the west—that, too, took labor fit for man's muscles. But there were the hogs that ran wild and made such quick fattening on the golden grain in the early fall. It was the hogs that paid most of the year's debt at the trading store, providing the bare necessities of life, and Nance could not give up that revenue, work or no work. Heaven knew, she needed them this year more than ever—since the fire which had flared in a night the previous harvest and taken all three of the stacks in the big meadow. That

had been disaster, indeed, for it had forced her to sell every head of her stock that she could, at lowest prices, leaving barely enough to get another start. McKane had bought, but he had driven a hard bargain.

This was another spring and hope stirred in her, as it is ever prone to do in the heart of youth.

Tired as she was, the girl brought forth from the ancient bureau in her own room beyond, a worn old Bible, and placing it beneath the lamp, sat herself down beside the table to the study of that Great Book which was her classic and her school. Mrs. Allison had retired into the depths of the cabin, from the small room adjoining, Nance could hear the regular breathing of Bud, weary from his labors. For a long time she sat still, her hands lying cupped around the Book, her face pensive with weariness, her eyes fixed unwinking on the yellow flame. Then she turned the thin pages with a reverent hand and at the honeysweet rhythms of the Psalms, stopped and began to read.

With David she wandered afar into fields of divine asphodel, was soon lost in a sea of spiritual praise and song.

Her young head, haloed with a golden spray in the light of the lamp, was bent above the Bible, her lashes lay like golden circles, spark-

ling on her cheeks, her lips were sweetly moulded to the words she unconsciously formed as she read.

For a long time she pored over the ancient treasure of the Scriptures, and in all truth she was innocent enough, lovely enough to have stirred a heart of stone. It was warm with the breath of spring outside. Window and door stood open and no breeze stirred the cheap white curtain at the sill.

Peace was there in the lone homestead by the river, the security that comes with knowledge that all is looked to faithfully. Nance knew that the two huge padlocks on the stout log barn that housed the horses and the two milk cows, were duly fastened, for their keys hung on the wall beside the towel-roller. She knew that the well-board was down, that the box was filled with wood for the early breakfast fire.

" 'In Thee, Oh, Lord, do I put my trust,' " she read in silence. " 'Let me never be ashamed, deliver me in Thy righteousness——' "

She laid her temples in her palms, her elbows on the table, and her blue eyes followed the printed lines with a rapt delight.

Suddenly she sat upright, alert, her face lifted like that of a startled creature of the wild. She had heard no sound. There had been no tremor of the earth to betray a step outside, and yet she felt a presence.

She did not look toward the openings, but stared at the wall before her with its rows of shelves behind their screened doors where her mother kept her scoured pans.

And then, suddenly, there came a thin, keen whine, a little clear whistle, and a knife stood quivering between her dropped hands, its point imbedded deep in the leaves of the old Bible.

For a moment she sat so, while a flush of anger poured up along her throat to flare to the roots of her banded hair.

With no uncertain hand she jerked the blade from the profound pages, leapt to her feet, snatched a stub of pencil from a broken mug on a shelf, tore a fly-leaf from the precious Book, and, bending in the light, wrote something on it. She folded the bit of paper, thrust the knife point through it and, turning swiftly, flung them viciously through the window where the thin curtain had been parted.

She stood so, facing the window defiantly, scorning to blow out the light.

Then she dropped her eyes to the desecrated Word and they were flaming—and this is what she had written on the fly-leaf:

"The Lord is the strength of my life—of whom shall I be afraid? Thought an host shall encamp against me, my heart shall not fear."

Very deliberately she closed the door and window, turned locks on both, picked up her

lamp and Bible and went into her own room beyond. Serene in the abiding faith of those divine words she soon forgot the world and all it held of work and care, of veiled threat and menace.

At daybreak she opened the window and scanned the ground outside. There was no thin-bladed knife in sight, no folded bit of paper with its holy defiance. The whole thing might have been a dream.

CHAPTER III

THE IRON HAND OF SKY LINE

Kate Cathrew—Cattle Kate Cathrew—lived like an eagle, on the crest of the world looking down. She looked down along the steep slopes of Mystery Ridge, dark with the everlasting green of connifers, speckled with the lighter green of glade and brush patch, the weathered red of outcropping stone—far down to the silver thread of Nameless River flowing between its grass-clad banks, the fair spread of the valley with its priceless feeding land.

The buildings of Sky Line Ranch lay nestled at the foot of Rainbow Cliff, compact, solid, like a fortress, reached only by cattle trails, for there was no wagon road. There could have been none on these forbidding steeps. The buildings themselves were built of logs, but all that was within them had come into the lonesome country on pack-mules, even to the big steel range in the kitchen. The house itself was an amazing place, packed with all necessities, beautiful with luxuries, its contents worth a fortune. It had many rooms and a broad veranda circled it. Pine trees stood in ranks about it, and out of the

sheer face of Rainbow Cliff at the back a six-inch stream of crystal water shot forth in a graceful arc from the height of a man's shoulder, to fall into a natural basin in the solid rock by its own ceaseless action.

And stretching out like widespread wings on either side this majestic cliff ran crowning the ridge for seven miles, a splendid escarpment, straight up-and-down, averaging two hundred feet from its base in the slanting earth to the sharp line of its rim-rock.

Rainbow Cliff, grim guardian of the Upper Country and the Deep Heart hills themselves, supposed to be impassable in all its length, dark in the early day but gleaming afar with all the colors of the spectrum when the sun dropped over toward the west at noon. It was this gorgeous radiance, caused by the many shades of the weathered stone, which had given the battlement its name. No man was ever known to have scaled the cliff—save and except John Allison, found dead at its foot two years back—for the giant spine was alike on both sides. Men from the Upper Country had penetrated the Deep Hearts to its northern base, but there they had stopped, to circle its distant ends, void of the secrets they had hoped to wrest from it.

And Kate Cathrew lived under it, a strange, half-sybaritic woman, running her cattle on the slopes of Mystery, riding after them like any

man, standing in at round-up, branding, beef-gathering, her keen eyes missing nothing, her methods high-handed. Her riders obeyed her lightest word, though they were mostly of a type that few men would care to handle, hard-featured, close-lipped, sharp-eyed, hard riders and hard drinkers, as all the world of the Deep Hearts knew.

Once in a blue moon they went to Bement, the town that lay three days' ride to the north beyond the hills, and what they did there was merely hinted at. They drank and played and took possession of its four saloons, and when they finally reared out of it to go back to their loneliness and work, the town came out of its temporary retirement, breathing again.

Yet Kate Cathrew handled these men and got good work out of them, and she belonged to none of them.

Not but what there were hot hearts in the outfit and hands that itched for her, lips that wet themselves hungrily when she passed close in her supreme indifference.

But Rio Charley carried a bullet-scar in his right shoulder, and Big Basford walked with a slight limp—yet they both stayed with her.

"Sort of secret-society stuff," said Price Selwood once, "Kate is the Grand Vizier."

There was no other white woman at Sky Line. She would have none. Minnie Pine, a stalwart

young Pomo half-breed, and old Josefa, brown as parchment and non-committal, carried on the housework under her supervision, and no one else was needed.

At noon of the day after Kate's visit to the store at Cordova, she sat in the big living-room at Sky Line looking over accounts. An observer having seen her on the previous occasion, would hardly have recognized her now. Gone were the broad hat, the pearl-buttoned shirt, the fringed riding skirt and the boots.

The black hair was piled high on her head, its smooth backward sweep crinkled by the tight curl that would not be brushed out. There was fragrance about her, and the dress she wore was of dark blue flowered silk, its clever draping setting off her form to its best advantage, which needed no advantage. Silk stockings smoothed themselves lovingly over her slender ankles, and soft kid slippers, all vanity of cut and make and sparkling buckle, clothed her feet in beauty.

She was either a fool or very brave, for she was the living spirit of seduction.

But the sombre eyes she turned up from her work to scan the rider who came to her, his hat in his hands, were all business, impersonal.

"Well?" she said impatiently.

The man was young, scarce more than a boy, of a devil-may-care type, and he looked at her fearlessly.

"Here's something for you, Boss," he said grinning, as he handed her a soiled bit of paper.

It was thin, yellowed with age, and it seemed to have been roughly handled.

The mistress of Sky Line spread it out before her on the top of the dark wood desk.

> "The Lord is the strength of my life," she read, "of whom shall I be afraid? Though an host shall encamp against me, my heart shall not fear."

It was unsigned and the characters, while hurriedly scrawled, were made by bold strokes, as if a strong heart had, indeed, inspired them, a strong hand penned them.

With a full-mouthed oath Kate Cathrew crumpled the bit of paper in her hand and flung it in the waste-basket against the wall.

"How did you get that?" she demanded.

"On the point of the knife you sent th' girl," he answered soberly, "an' right near the middle of my stomach."

For a considerable space of time the woman sat regarding him. "I sent you to help in the breaking of morale," she said coldly, "not to bring me back defiance. Next time I'll send a more trustworthy man."

She nodded dismissal, and the youth went quickly, his face burning.

At the far end of the veranda he almost ran into Big Basford, whose huge, gorilla-like shape

was made more sinister and repellant by the perceptible limp. Basford was always somewhere near, if possible, when men talked with Kate Cathrew.

His great strength and stature, his small eyes, black and rimmed with red, his unkempt head and flaring black beard, everything about him suggested a savagery and power with which few men cared to trifle.

He scanned the boy's flushed face with swift appraising.

"I take it," he said grinning, "that the boss wasn't pleased with you?"

"Take it or leave it," said the other with foolhardy daring, "is it any of your business?"

With a smothered roar Big Basford leaped for him, surprisingly nimble on his lamed foot, surprisingly light.

He caught him by the throat and bore him backward across the veranda's edge, so that both bodies fell heavily on the boards of the floor.

"You'll find what's my business, damn you," gritted Big Basford; "you ——!"

He got to his knees and straddling the lad's body came down on his throat with all his weight in his terrible grip. At the sound of the fall Minnie Pine leaped to a window.

"That black devil is killing the Blue Eyes,"

she said in patois Spanish to Josefa. "Give me that knife——"

But there was no need of Minnie's interference.

Kate Cathrew hard heard that heavy thunder of falling bodies on boards and she was quicker than her half-breed, for she was up and away from the desk before Big Basford had risen on his knees, and as she rose her left hand swept down the wall, taking from its two pegs the heavy quirt that always hung there.

With the first jab of the boy's head back on the floor, she was running down the veranda, her arm raised high. With the second she was between Big Basford and the light like a threat of doom.

As he surged forward once more above the blackening face in his throttling fingers, she flung her body back in a stiff arc to get more impetus—and drove the braided lash forward and down like a fury.

It circled Big Basford's head from the back, the bitter end snapping across his face with indescribable force.

It curled him away from his victim, tumbling back on his heels with his murderous hands covering his cheeks.

For a moment he hung on the veranda's edge, balanced, then slipped off, lurching on his lame

foot. He held his hands over his face for a tense moment. Then he looked up through his fingers, where the blood was beginning to ooze, straight at the woman.

The red-rimmed eyes were savage with rage and hurt, but behind both was a flaming passion which seemed to swell and burgeon with a perverted admiration.

"I've told you before, Basford," said Kate Cathrew, "that I will deal with my men myself. I don't need your overly zealous aid. Get out of my sight—and stay out till you can heed what I say. Minnie, take this fool away—pump some wind into him. Give him some whiskey."

She touched the boy contemptuously with the toe of her buckled slipper. He was weakly trying to get up and the Pomo girl unceremoniously finished the effort, lifting him almost bodily in her arms and supporting him through the door into the kitchen. The look she turned over her shoulder at Big Basford was venomous.

The owner of Sky Line walked down the veranda to her living-room door. At its lintel she stopped and stood, drawing the heavy quirt through her fingers, looking back at Big Basford. He had watched her progress and now the hard, bright, sparkling gaze of her dark eyes seemed to force him to movement, so that he picked up his hat, set it on his head and turned away toward the corrals at Rainbow's foot,

swinging with a rolling gait that further made one think of jungle folk.

But the lips in the flaring beard were twitching.

Kate Cathrew went in and hung the quirt on its smooth pegs, then sat down and took up her interrupted work just where she had left it.

"Three hundred head," she said, "prime on hoof—at thirteen-fifty——" and her pen began to travel evenly across the page before her.

CHAPTER IV

THE MYSTERY OF BLUE STONE CAÑON

The spring sailed by like a full-rigged ship on a windy sea, bright with sun, sweet with surging airs, a thing of swiftness and delight.

On the rich flats of Nameless, Nance Allison tilled her soil and her blue eyes caressed the land. She loved every sparkling ripple of the whispering stream, every cloud-shadow on the austere slopes, each jutting shoulder of ridge and spine. The homestead was a fetish with her. It had been her Pappy's dream of empire. It was hers. He had stuck by and toiled, had secured his patent, made the good start.

She asked nothing better than to carry on, to see it prosper and endure.

But strange disasters had befallen her, one after the other—first and bitterest, the hidden rope stretched in a cattle trail two years back, just after John Allison's mysterious death, which sent young Bud's pony tumbling to the gulch below and left the boy to walk lopsided ever after.

At that the girl had almost weakened in her stubborn purpose. She had held the young head

in her arms many a weary hour when the pain was worst,, and tried to build a plan of a future away from Nameless Valley, but Bud would not listen. The bare thought made him fret and toss, sent the red blood burning in his cheeks.

"We'll never let 'em beat us out, Nance," he would pant with his hot breath, "the land is ours, safe and legal, and no bunch o' cut-throats is goin' to get it from us. Not while we can stand—not while we can ride or plow—or use a gun!"

But Nance would stop him always there.

" 'Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me,' " she would say gently, "we have no need of guns, Bud."

However, as the seasons passed, each with its promise and its inevitable blight, her face had became graver, less smiling. There had been the hay fire then—the fire in the night where no fire was or had been. There had been the six fat steers that disappeared from the range and were never heard of, though Bud rode Buckskin to a lather in a fruitless search for them. There had been the good harness cut to pieces one night when Bud had forgotten to lock it up.

All these had been disasters in a real sense to these people living so meagerly with their scant possessions.

And this year they were more than poor, they were in debt to McKane for the new harness

that had to be bought to replace the other. But Nance looked at her field of corn coming in long rows of tender green on the brown floor of the well worked land and hoped. She was prone to hope. It was part of her equipment for the battle of life, her shield before the lance of her courage, her buckler of energy.

"It looks like a heavy crop, McKane," she told the trader honestly, "and I'll have far and away more than enough for you—I think I'll have enough left for my winter stake."

"Hope you do," said McKane, for though he was none too scrupulous where his own interests were concerned, he felt a vague admiration for the game girl working her lonely homestead in her dead father's place.

So, with the crop spreading its four delicate blades to the coaxing sun and the hay knee-deep in the big fenced flat across the river, Nance Allison laid by her labors for a while to rest her body and refresh her soul.

"I've just got to ride the hills, Mammy," she said smiling, "got to fish the holes in Blue Stone Cañon, to climb the slopes for a little while. It will be my only chance, you know—there's the hay to cut soon and the corn to cultivate, and the cattle to look after later. I can't work all the year, Mammy, without a little play."

At which the mother's tragic eyes filled with tears—this for her daughter's only play—the

riding in the lonesome hills—the fishing for trout in a shadowed cañon—when her young feet should have been tripping to the lilt of fiddles—when she should have had ribbons and muslin flounces, and a sweetheart—the things of youth ere her youth should pass! Pass, toiling at the handles of a plow! It was a poignant pain indeed, that brought those insistent tears, that withheld the fear-urged protest.

So, in the golden mornings, Nance began to saddle Buckskin and ride away, a snack of bread and bacon tied behind the cantle, to come ambling home at dusk happy, sweet, filled with the joy of life, sometimes a string of speckled beauties dangling at her knee, sometimes empty handed.

Sometimes Bud went with her, but it was not fair to Dan and Molly, the heavy team, to cheat them of their share of rest, since Bud must ride one or the other of them, and so Nance rode for the most part alone.

She "lifted up her eyes to the hills" in all truth and drew from them a very present strength. The dark, blue-green slopes of the tumbling ridges, covered with a tapestry of finely picked out points of pine and fir-trees, filled her with the joy of the nature lover, the awed humility of the humble heart which considers the handiwork of God.

She lay for hours on some bleeched log high

in a sunny glade, her hands under her fair head, her lips smiling unconsciously, her long blue eyes dreaming into the cloud flecked heavens, and sometimes she wondered what the future held for her after the fashion of maids since the world began. She recalled the restless wanderings of the family in her early years, remembered vaguely the home and the school in old Missouri, her father's ceaseless urge for travel. And then had come their journey's end, here in the austere loneliness of Nameless Valley, where his nomad heart had settled down and had been at home. She thought of these familiar things, and of others not familiar, such as picturing the house she and Bud would one day build on the big meadow, with running water piped from the rushing stream itself, with carpets—Mrs. Allison was already sewing interminable balls of "rags" for the fabric—and with such simple comforts as seemed to her nothing short of luxuries. She knew of a woman in Bement who wove carpets, a Mrs. Porter, at the reasonable price of thirty cents a yard, warp included. The warp should be brown-and-white, she decided—at least she had so decided long back after many conferences with her mother.

Brown and white running softly through the dim colors of the rags—nothing new enough to be bright went into the balls, though there would

be a soft golden glow all through the hit-and-miss fabric from the "hanks" dyed with copperas—brown and white, Nance thought, would make it seem like the floor of the woods in fall, weathered and beautiful.

She could scarcely wait the time of the fulfillment of this dress, when the cabin floors should be soft under foot.

Longing for the refinements was strong in her, though limited painfully to such simple scope as Cordova supplied, or as she remembered dimly from the days of her childhood in Missouri.

But the glory of the land was too compelling for idle dreams of the future. Here at hand were carpets of brown pine needles, shot through with scarlet bleeding hearts.

Here were mosses soft and wonderful when one bent close enough to study their minute and intricate patterns. Here were vast distances and dropping slopes, veiled in pale blue haze so delicate as to seem an hallucination.

Here also, were the mysterious fastnesses of Blue Stone Cañon, its perpendicular walls of eroded rock cut by seam and fissure, its hollow aisles resonant always of the murmurous stream that tumbled through them.

Nance loved the cañon. She liked to climb among its boulders, to whip its frequent pools for the trout that hung in their moving smooth-

ness, to listen to the thousand voices that seemed always whispering and talking. They were made of fairy stuff and madness, these voices. If one sat still and listened long enough he could swear that they were real, that strange concourses discussed the secrets of the spheres. On the hottest days of summer the cañon was cool, for a wind drew always through it from its unknown head somewhere in the Deep Hearts themselves far to the north and east. Buckskin felt the mysterious influence of the soundful silence, pricking his ears, listening, holding his breath to let it out in snorts, and Nance laughed at his uneasiness.

"Buckskin," she said one day, as she lay stretched at length on a flat rock beside a boiling riffle, "you're a bundle of nerves, a natural-born finder of fears. There isn't a thing bigger or uglier than yourself in all the cañon—unless it's a panther skulking up in the branches, and he wouldn't come near for a fortune—though what could be fortune to a cougar, I wonder?" she went on to herself, smiling at the strip of sky that topped the frowning rimrock, "only a full belly, I guess—the murderer."

She lay a long time basking in the sun that shone straight down, for it was noon, revelling in the relaxation of her young body, long worked to the limit and frankly tired.

She took her bread and bacon from a pocket

and ate with the relish which only healthy youth can muster, clearing up the last crumb, drank from the stream, her face to the surface, and finally rose with a long breath of satisfaction.

"You can stay here, you old fraid-cat," she said to the pony, dropping his rein over his head, "it's hard on your feet, anyway. Me—I'm going on up a ways."

Buckskin looked anxiously after her, but stayed where he was bid, as a well-trained horse should do, and the girl went on up the cañon, her fair head bare, her hands on her hips.

She drank in the sombre beauty of the dull blue walls, hung to their towering rims with corruscation and prominence carved fantastically by the erosion of uncounted years—listened, lips apart the better to hear, to the deep blended monotone of the talking voices.

She skirted great boulders fallen from above, waded a riffle here, leaped a narrow there, and always the great cut became rougher, wilder, more forbidding and mysterious.

She stood for a long time beside a pool that lay, still-seeming and dark, behind a huge rock, but in whose shadowed depths she could see the swirling of white sand that marked its turmoil.

The cañon widened here a bit, its floor strewn with jumbled boulders, its walls honeycombed with water-eaten caves.

When the snows melted in the high gulches of

the Deep Hearts a little later, this place would be a roaring race. She thought of its foamy volume pouring from the cañon's mouth to swell the flood of Nameless a bit below her southern boundary. But it was a lone and lovely spot now, what with its peopled silence and its blue-toned walls.

These things were passing through her mind as she watched the swirling sand, when all suddenly, as if an invisible hand had brushed her, she became alert in every fibre.

She had heard nothing new in the murmurous monotone, seen no shadow among the pale shadows about her—yet something had changed. Some different element had intruded itself into the stark elements of the place.

Her skin rose in tiny prickles, she felt her muscles stiffen. She had lived in the face of menace so long that she was super-sensitive, had developed a seventh sense that was quick to the *nth* degree.

She stood for a moment gathering her powers, then she whirled in her tracks, sweeping the cañon's width with eyes that missed nothing.

They did not miss the movement which was almost too swift for sight—the dropping of some dark object behind a rock, the passing of a bit of plumy tail.

The rock itself was between her and the

broken foot of the wall, one of a mass that had tumbled from the weathered face. For a long time she stood very still, waiting, watching with unwinking eyes. Then, at the rock's edge, but farther away, she caught another glimpse of that tail-tip. Its wearer was making for the wall-foot, keeping the rock between. A wolf would do so—but there was something about that bit of plume which did not spell wolf. It was tawny white, and it was more loosely haired, not of the exact quality of a wolf's brush. Once more a tiny tip showed—and on a sudden daring impulse Nance Allison leaped for the rock, caught its top with both hands and peered over.

With a snarl and a whirl the owner of the tail faced her in the low mouth of a cave, his pointed ears flat to his head, his feet spread wide apart, his back dropped, his jaws apart and ready, and round his outstretched neck there stood up in quivering defiance, the broad white ruff of a pure-bred Collie dog!

The girl stared at him with open-mouthed amazement—and at the more astonishing thing which lay along the pebbled earth beneath him—for this was the thin little leg and foot of a small child.

In utter silence and stillness she stood so, her hands on the rock's top, and for all the length of time that she watched there was not

a tremor of the little leg, nor a movement of the dog's crouching body. The only motion in the tense picture was the ripple of the stream, the quiver of the lips drawn back from the gleaming fangs.

When the tension became unbearable Nance spoke softly.

"Come, boy," she said, "come—boy—come."

She ventured a hand across the rock, but the quivering lips drew back a trifle more, the big body crouched a bit lower—and the little bare leg draw out of sight behind the edge of the cave.

Carefully the girl slipped back from the rock toward the pool, gained its lip, and dropped swiftly away down the cañon.

At a little distance she drew a deep breath and looked back.

The blue cañon lay still under the filtered rays of the noon sun, empty, murmurous, enchanted.

The mouth of the cave was black and vacant.

There was no sign of fiery eyes and slavering jaws, of a thin little leg under a fringe of blue jeans rags!

With eyes dilated and lips closed in amazed silence Nance Allison made her way back to Buckskin, mounted and returned to the flats of Nameless.

She had found Mystery with a capital, but

she knew that she must wait with patience its unravelling.

Those pale eyes between the flat ears held a challenge which only a fool would disregard—it would take time and patience.

But, for the love of humanity, why was a child hiding like a fawn in Blue Stone Cañon—with only a dog to guard it—and with no sign of camp or people?

CHAPTER V

WHAT NANCE FOUND

Nance pushed Buckskin hard and rode in early to the cabin and her mother's counsel. She put the little horse away in the stable and fed him his quota of the precious hay, for Buckskin was not turned out to graze. He, along with Dan and Mollie, was too necessary to the life of the homestead to take chances with.

They would miss him sorely should he go the way of the six steers.

She hurried up and pulled open the kitchen door.

"Mammy," she said excitedly to the gaunt woman shelling peas by the table, "I've found something in the cañon. I wonder—should I meddle?"

Mrs. Allison laid her wrinkled brown hands on the edge of the pan and looked at her daughter.

"It's according," she said soberly, "does it *need* meddlin'?"

"That's what I don't know. I found a Collie dog—a savage dog for that breed—and a little

child hiding in a cave. I couldn't get near to them, but they act like they know what they're doing—they had watched me from behind a rock and crawled to the cave in line with it when I turned. I only saw the child's foot—but it was a thin little thing—and the old jeans pant-leg was weathered to rags. There wasn't a sign of camp—nothing. What *could* it mean?''

The anxiety of a universally loving heart was in Nance's voice. ''Did I do right to come away—or should I have tried some more to see them? It couldn't be done, though—the dog is on guard. He'll have to be handled slowly, I'm sure of that.''

Mrs. Allison considered this odd information gravely.

''It means someone else besides the child and dog, that's certain. They never got there by their lone selves.''

''But maybe they got lost from some one—and they may be hungry——'' the girl half rose at that thought, her brows gathering in distress—''though whoever could be in Blue Stone Cañon, and what for, I don't know.''

The older woman shook her head.

''Not one chance in a thousand of that. No—someone else is there, that's sure. An' I don't believe I'd meddle.''

But Nance rose determinedly.

''I've got to, Mammy,'' she said, ''I'd never

sleep another night if I didn't. Tomorrow I'll go back bright and early."

The mother regarded her with troubled eyes.

"Let Bud go, too—you never know—might be a trap or somethin'."

"With such bait? No. That little leg was so thin—like its owner was wispy. I wish it was morning."

All the rest of the day and the tranquil evening Nance felt a thrill and stir within her, a trouble. She milked old Whitefoot and her sleek black daughter, Pearly, to the remembered sound of the fairy voices of the cañon, and when she sat to her nightly reading of the Word beneath the coal-oil lamp on the table there intruded on the sacred page the gleaming fangs above that motionless small leg.

With grey dawn she was up and about her work that she might get an early start. Bud was all for going with her, but she would not have it so.

"I'll have trouble enough getting near," she told him, "the best I can do. Another stranger would make them wilder still."

The boy caught her hand as she swung up on Buckskin.

"Be careful, Sis," he said, "look sharp on every side."

He had never forgotten that stretched rope.

Neither had Nance, but she walked bravely in a faith which made her serenely bold.

"'Commit thy way unto the Lord,'" she said smiling, "'Trust also in Him.' Don't you fret—nor let Mammy, if you can help it. I'll be back soon as I can."

Then she was gone down across the flats with Buckskin on the lope, one hand feeling carefully for the package she had tied behind the saddle. This contained a goodly piece of boiled corn-beef and two slices of her mother's bread, fresh baked the day before. She was going armed with bribery.

The whole Nameless Valley between its great escarpments was fresh and cool with shadow, for the sun was not yet above Mystery ridge and the rimrock that marked the way to the cañon.

The river itself talked to the boulders in its bed, and the little winds that drew up the myriad defiles were sweet with the fragrance of pines and that nameless scent of water which cannot be described. All these things were the joy of life to Nance.

She loved them with a passion whose force she did not comprehend. They were what sweetened her hard and ceaseless toil, what made of each new day in her monotonous round something to be met with eager gladness, to be lived through

joyfully, missing nothing of the promise of dawn, the fulfillment of noon, the blessing of twilight. They had stirred and delighted the nomad heart of her father before her, they had filled her own with contentment.

Eager as she was to be in the cañon she did not miss the pale pageant of light above rimrock, or fail to watch the golden halo come along the crest of Rainbow Cliff.

But she soon crossed the river and entered the mouth of the great cut, leaving behind the miracle of burgeoning day, for here the shadows were still thick, like grey ghosts. She pushed on up for an hour or so, listening to the voices which were still talking, while the shadows thinned between the dusky walls.

At the point where she had left the pony the day before she dismounted and dropped his rein.

"You wait here, old nuisance," she said darkly, rubbing his restless ears, "for I may have sudden need of you. If you see me come flying out with a streak of tawny fur behind me, don't you dare break when I jump. So long."

She took the bread and meat from the saddle and started on foot. It was not so far to the swirling pool and the cave behind the rock, and long before the sunlight had crept half way down the ragged stone wall at the western side of the cañon she had reached them. She went care-

fully, picking her way, eyes scanning each turn and boulder. At the pool's edge she stood a long time, watching, listening, but there was nothing to be seen or heard.

She went to the mouth of the cave and peering in cautiously, called softly. She waited, but there was no answering growl, no whirlwind rush as she had half expected. The shallow cave was empty, save for some ashes of a dead fire and blankets. She circled the rock and began hunting for tracks in the white sand of the cañon bed—and presently she found them—small tracks of childish feet, set close beside the padded narrow prints of a dog—and they were going up the cañon, deeper into its fastnesses. She trailed them easily for a distance, then lost them in the foaming shallows of a riffle, and search as she would she could not find where they came out. There was a flat lip of rock on the other side, to be sure, but beyond that was sand again, and it lay clear, unruffled. Above the riffle was a long deep pool, swift and flowing, and she stood for a time contemplating it.

It hardly seemed possible that the two outcasts could have swum it, and yet—where were their tracks if they had not?

She circled the pool and went on, trailing carefully, but the bed beyond was composed of shale, blue and sharp—hard going for a child's bare feet, she thought compassionately—and

gave no sign of a crossing. For another hour she went on, scanning the walls, the fallen stones, the stream itself and every nook or corner where anything might hide. She was far in Blue Stone Cañon by this time and wondered at the endurance which could have brought a child so far. Or had some one come and taken it away? That was possible, of course, and yet—a grown up person would have left marks in the soft sand assuredly. She would—but at this point in her train of thought, she came around a sharp jut in the wall—and face to face with her quarry, or at least with part of it.

Startled, the dog she had seen the day before was crouched in the narrow way that led around the jut, his body half turned, one foot raised, tail lowered, and the face he turned back across his shoulder was the most vicious thing Nance had ever seen. He was crouched to spring, and the fury of his snarls, audible above the sound of the stream, made that odd clutch close her throat which always accompanies sudden horror.

Nance Allison was a brave woman, but she was scared then.

She stood rooted to the spot and could not tear her eyes from the dog's pale flaming orbs to look at the little creature which she knew was running with a flurry of rags and naked arms up along the cañon wall.

For a long moment they eyed each other, then, without other warning than a flicker of those flaming eyes, the Collie sprang.

He came high, sailing up and forward, his forepaws spread, his head thrust out and downward, his jaws gaping.

In the second that followed instinct acted in Nance, not reason. Instead of recoiling, she surged forward to meet the onslaught, her right arm raised before her like a horizontal bar.

The faded denim sleeve was down and buttoned at the wrist, where the gauntlet of her cheap leather glove made a cuff.

Into that gaping mouth went the arm, jamming hard, while she flung her left arm around the ruffed white throat like a clamp.

If she was surprised at her own instinctive and prompt action, the Collie was more so. Down on the sand went girl and dog, a rolling, tumbling bundle. In the half second which served to make the dog the victim instead of the attacking force, his outlook on the situation was completely changed. He had charged in a fury of rage. Now he fought frantically, but it was to free his mouth from the choking bar that filled it, to get his head out of the vice which held it. But Nance found herself in a dilemma, too. She was afraid to let go. As she rolled over in the struggle she cast desperate eyes up along the wall where she had seen the eerie

small figure running in its rags. True enough, it was there, stopped, facing her, bent forward, its little hands clasped in a curiously old fashion of distress.

"Little boy!" she called, "come here! Come and talk to your dog—come quick! I won't hurt you. Come and call him—please come!"

For a moment she lay panting, looking into the dilated eyes so near her face.

"Old chap," she said softly, "what's all the fuss? I'm your friend if you only knew it. Nice doggie——"

She glanced at the child again, who had not moved.

"Come on, sonny," she called coaxingly, "come on—please."

Slowly the child came forward, hesitant, afraid, his small face pale with fright.

He sidled near and put out a dirty hand to the dog's right ear. The little hand closed—pulled—and Nance felt the dog's body twitch in an effort to obey. She knew at once that that was the way they travelled together—the child holding to his ear. Slowly she relaxed her grip, let go the backward pressure. The Collie jerked free and backed off shaking his head, and Nance sat up, folding her feet beneath her.

Then she smiled at the two waifs of Blue Stone Cañon.

"That isn't a nice way to treat folks who come to see you, is it, sonny?" she asked, "to set your dog on them?"

"I didn't set him on," said the child in a high treble, "he set himself on you."

"I guess you're right," answered the girl, "but don't let go of him again. Go over there and pick up that package and bring it to me."

She pointed to the package of bread and meat which had been flung wide in the recent trouble, and the child obeyed, dragging the Collie along, who went unwillingly, his distrustful and baffled eyes turned back across his shoulder to keep her in sight.

The child, too, was wary, reaching far out, stretching his small body to the utmost between her hand and his hold on the dog's ear.

Quickly Nance unrolled the cloth. She counted on the aroma which now arose on the clear air.

"I'm hungry," she said nonchalantly, "are you?"

The boy nodded.

"And your dog, too?"

"I 'spect so," he answered gravely.

She broke the food into sections and handed a portion over.

The dirty little hand reached eagerly this time.

"Feed him some," she said, indicating the

dog, but already the child was dividing as best he could without releasing his hold.

The dog grabbed the fragrant meat and bolted it, watching her the while. Quickly she tossed him a bit of her own. He snapped that up also and she fancied the expression of the pale eyes changed. She remembered now the extraordinary lightness of the great furry body, as if there was little beneath the splendid tawny coat save bones and spirit. Plenty of the latter, she reflected, smiling. Whew! but wasn't he a fighter? But trained to the last degree—though he regarded her as a foe, still at the touch of the small hand for which he had fought he stood obedient. Pretending to eat herself, she managed to give the greater part of the food to the two before her, and they devoured it to the ultimate crumb.

"Where you live?" she asked the child at last off-handedly, but he did not answer. He was picking the crumbs he had dropped from the front of his bleached blue shirt—the pitiful excuse for a shirt, without sleeves, if one excepted the strings that hung from the shoulders, without buttons and all but falling from the scrawny little body underneath. As she watched him Nance's heart ached for his poverty, for his woe-begone appearance. She was filled with a cautious excitement. The Collie had sat down beside the boy, who had loosed his hold by now.

It seemed that hostilities were relaxed, though she took no chances.

"*I* live down on the flats by the river," she said presently. "I get lots of fish from these pools. They're awfully good, too."

The child nodded.

"I know," he said, "we do, too."

"Who catches 'em?" asked Nance. "Not you?"

He shook his head.

"No. Brand does."

"Who's Brand?" she followed quickly, but once more the child shook his unkempt head.

"Just Brand," he said.

Nance saw that further questioning would not do, therefore, she fell back on the wiles of woman, the blandishments of sex.

She rocked on her heels, holding her ankles in her hands and smiled with the winsome sweetness which so few in the world knew she possessed.

"I like little boys," she said, "and I haven't any. But I've got a pony. Name's Buckskin."

"Brand's got one, too," said the child, "only Diamond ain't a pony—he's a horse. He's a big horse. Brand has got to swing me pretty high to get me up. When we ride——"

But again some inner warning stopped him, some stern habit closed his mouth.

Nance held out a hand.

"If you'll come sit in my lap a little while," she coaxed, "I'll tell you all about the place where I live. Will you?"

The little fellow twisted in shy indecision.

"Don't like me?" Nance asked aggrievedly. "I like you——" She smiled again and reached the hand a little nearer.

Diffidently the child took it—edged up—hesitated.

She was wise enough to not insist, even to relax her pull a bit.

True to the law of the contrary which rules the world of childhood, he sidled closer—leaned against her shoulder—and the girl gently folded him in her arms.

At the feel of the thin little body, all bones and skin under the dilapidated garments, the protective thrill of potential motherhood went through her and tears swam suddenly in her eyes.

A neglected pair, or one smitten by dire poverty, she thought pitifully—this lone little chap hiding among the rocks and guarded so well by the skeleton dog. The dog, by the way, had risen belligerently to his feet at the child's advance, and his eyes were gleaming again at this unlooked-for familiarity with a total stranger.

"Call him, sonny," she said, and the child obeyed.

And so it was that after a while Blue Stone Cañon saw the miracle of friendship grow like a magic flower in its pale light, for the girl talked low and sweetly to the child in her lap—and strangest of all, the savage Collie sat gravely on his plumy tail beside the two, accepting the turn of fate.

When Nance made ready to go away at noon she knew that Brand was coming at night, that these two had always ridden on Diamond, and that they would ride again some day, while Dirk, the Collie, would run beside them. She knew that Brand was always gone in daylight, and that the cave by the rock below was home.

But that was all she did know, or could find out, except that the child's name was Sonny and that he was seven.

Perhaps it was due to the fact that she had inadvertently called him that, that she owed the success of the hour.

Be that as it may, the yearning pity which she felt made Nance use the last and greatest of feminine wiles to win him to her.

"I'm going away now," she said smiling into the grave brown eyes in the little face, "but if you'll kiss me—and won't tell Brand a thing about me, I'll come again tomorrow—and I'll bring you some more goodies. How about it?"

The promise, the kiss—these completed the

downfall of the lonely waif, and Nance's heart ached anew at the pathetic grip of the weazened arms about her neck.

From the far bend she looked back—and this time it was to see the two strange denizens of Blue Stone Cañon watching her in the habitual repression and silence of their unnatural lives, but withal so hungrily that the mist swam in her eyes again.

"What'd you find, Nance?" Bud queried when she rode in at home.

"I found a mystery I'm going to unravel," she answered grimly, "or my name's not Nance Allison—and I made love to a half-starved little kid—and got all chewed up by a dog—and I heard of a man who's going to get a piece of my mind some day—now, mark me!"

"Land sake!" said Mrs. Allison in the doorway, "what are they—campers?"

"No—and it looks mighty mysterious to me, Mammy. As soon's Bud puts Buckskin away I'll tell you all about it.

CHAPTER VI

SHADOWS IN THE SHERIFF'S GLASS

The sheriff went back to the store at Cordova and looked the proprietor in the eye.

"McKane," he said, "is there anything you want to say to me?"

McKane looked at him sullenly.

"Don't know's there is," he answered frankly, "you're able to answer it if I have, I find. I didn't wake up for two hours after you left that day."

"I'm sorry," said Price Selwood earnestly, "but you know you run against my fist yourself. I'd never mess up with a friend if I didn't have to. You'd ought to know me well enough to know that."

"I guess I do—but that damned sneering threat of yours, Price—it just set me to seeing red. You don't seem to know a woman from a man, somehow."

There was a petulent complaint in his voice.

"Not when the woman's Kate Cathrew," said the sheriff grimly, "I don't."

"You're a good sheriff, Price, and a good man, but you're stupid as hell sometimes. To hold Miss Cathrew under your two-bit magnifying glass of suspicion as you do is drivelling twiddle—silly child's play. True, she lives an out-of-the-ordinary life——"

"I'll say she does," interrupted Selwood, "by what power does she hold together the worst set of off-scourings this country ever saw? Why do they obey her lightest word, step lively when she speaks in that high-and-mighty tone of hers? Tell me that. It ain't natural—not by a long shot. And here's another thing—a good two-thirds of them ain't cattlemen. Never were. I know that every new one, as he has come in from time to time during these past three or four years, has had to be taught the cattle business. Caldwell, her foreman, is a cowhand—he came from Texas—and so is that long black devil they call Sud Provine, and one or two others, but the rest are city products, or I'm a liar—and why does she want that kind? And she keeps a heavy force for the amount of cattle she runs."

McKane spread his hands in eloquent resignation.

"You two-bit officers!" he said, "you make me sick."

"Make you sick because you're already sick

for Kate Cathrew—who wouldn't wipe her boots on you, and you know it."

"Sure, I know it. But that don't prevent me taking up for a woman, anywhere, any time."

Uncertain of morals and dealings as the trader was, there was a simple dignity in his words which demanded respect, and they struck Selwood so.

"I'm sorry I can't see Cattle Kate in the proper light, McKane," he said, "and that we've come to words and blows over her. Maybe I lack something fine which you possess—but she's under my glass, all right, and I'm as sure as I stand here that some day its rays will show her up."

"As what?"

"I'm not saying."

"Men have died in their boots for less than that."

"True—but I won't."

"Maybe not."

"Look here, McKane—don't mess into Kate Cathrew's affairs. I'm giving you my hunch that the man who does is due for tragedy sooner or later—and you have no reason, for Kate don't care for you."

"No—nor for any other man."

"Wrong," said the sheriff succinctly.

"Eh?"

"Don't forget the man who comes in once a

year—and he's due before so very long again—the man who sends her that regular letter from New York and who comes across the continent to see her?"

"Mr. Lawrence Arnold? Why, he's her business partner—owns a full half-interest in Sky Line."

"Well? You watch Kate's face when you see them together again this summer."

"Hell!" said McKane again in that resigned voice, "how'd you ever get elected with those reasoning powers of yours?"

"Oh—all right. But stay clear of Cattle Kate's fringes—for some day there's going to be the prettiest blow-up ever seen in the cattle country of the Deep Heart Hills—and Kate's going mile high on the explosion."

"If you're so damned bright as a sheriff why don't you busy yourself with trying to find out who stole that last bunch of steers from Conlan a month ago? The old man's half crazy with the loss. Yes—and that ninety head from Bos-sink—and the ones run off Jermyn's range last year? It looks like there's plenty he-man stuff around Nameless to interest your keen powers of perception without picking on a woman."

The sheriff was tying his sack of purchases on behind his saddle and didn't look round.

"I'll never find those cattle, McKane—nor will anyone else—this side of cow-heaven," he said

as he mounted, "but they, and their manner of disappearance, along with a few other things are all under that magnifying glass of mine. I think their ghosts will be in at that blow-up."

"That's rustler talk, Price," said the trader shortly.

"Sure," returned Selwood as he rode away.

That talk set going in the sheriff's mind a train of thought which was recurrent with him, which was forever travelling with him somewhere in his consciousness. Sometimes one thing set it going, sometimes another. In the two years already passed of his term of office it had been a matter of deep annoyance to him that he had not been able to put his hands on the mysterious rustlers who from time to time got away with stock up and down Nameless River.

This unseen, baleful agency was baffling as smoke.

It struck here—and there—with a decisive clean stroke like the head of a killing hawk, and there was nothing to show the how and wherefore. Cattle disappeared from the range with a smooth magic which was maddening. They left no trace, nothing. It seemed ridiculous that ninety head of steers could be driven out of the country leaving no trail, but such had been the case.

Selwood himself, with a picked posse, had trailed them into the river, and there they must

have taken to themselves wings, for they had apparently never come out. To be sure Kate Cathrew was driving out her fall beef at the time, and the trampling band had crossed the river a bit below where the ninety head had entered the stream. That trampled crossing was the only spot for miles each way where a cattle-brute could have left the water, for Selwood searched every foot with eagle eyes. The coincidence of time stayed with the sheriff doggedly, even though the Cathrew cattle, honestly branded, went boldly through Cordova and down the Strip, as the narrow valley beside Nameless was called, and thence out to the railroad, three long days' drive away.

And the smaller thefts—old man Conlon's bunch, and those of Jermyn—all lifted light as a feather. These had left not even a hoof-mark. It was smooth stuff—and it galled the sheriff, was a secret source of humiliation. He had heard a good many remarks about his own inaction, though nearly all of the ranchers in the country were his friends.

But deep inside himself he laid a spiritual finger on the handsome, frowning-eyed woman at Sky Line and held it there.

Sooner or later, he told himself, as he had told McKane, the steady rays of his searching glass would reveal in her the thing he knew was there.

This was not logic, it was instinct—a poor thing for a sheriff to base his actions on, apparently, but Price Selwood based his thereon in unwavering confidence.

And if he could have looked into the living-room at Sky Line that day he would have jotted in his mental note-book as correct, one premise—for the mistress sat again at her dark wood desk and read a letter, and her face was well worth watching.

The letter bore a New York postmark, and its terms were sharp and decisive, almost legal, leaving no doubt of their meaning.

Thus they carried to her consciousness a clear presentment of satisfaction concerning the last shipment of cattle, and just as clear an avowal of affection.

Kate Cathrew's sharp face was suffused with a light not meant for any eyes at Sky Line as she read and reread the sheets in her hands.

At their concluding words—"and so think I shall be with you at the usual time"—her lips parted over her teeth in a slow smile which was the visible embodiment of passion, while her dark eyes became for a moment slumbrous with the same surging force.

There *was* a man this woman loved, if ever a face spoke truth, and he was the writer of the letter.

Though the scattered denizens of the outside

world of Nameless knew nothing of this, it was covertly known at Sky Line.

Every one of the hard-eyed band of riders knew it, with varying feelings, Minnie Pine knew it and old Josefa. Big Basford knew it and his red-rimmed eyes glowed with the light of murder when he watched Kate sit on the veranda with Lawrence Arnold in the long summer days while the light drowsed down from the high blue vault and Rainbow Cliff sent down its prismatic colors shining afar over the slopes of Mystery. There was a look in the woman's dusky eyes that was plain as print—the hot, unsmiling, inflammable look of untempered passion.

Now she folded the letter, slipped it back in its envelope and put it away in a drawer of the desk which she locked securely with a key on a ring that she took from a pocket in her neat outing skirt. The act was indicative of Kate Cathrew's mode of life in her high domain. All things were ordered, filed and locked, so to speak, and she alone was the master.

A little later she went out on the broad veranda and sat down in the deep willow chair which rocked there, stirred fantastically by the stiff breeze which swept in across the great blue gulf of space between the peaks. Her eyes dropped down and down the wooded slopes of

Mystery slanting beneath her to the long green flats on Nameless, the equally long brown spaces of Nance Allison's tilled field. Sight of that field was a barb in her consciousness. It never failed to stir her to slow and resurgent anger. It was an affront to her arrogant autocracy, a challenge and a taunt.

She who hewed to her mark with such brilliant finesse, who had not so far failed to get what she wanted from life, had failed to get those flats—the best feeding ground for cattle in a hundred miles of range.

Cattle Kate Cathrew frowned as she regarded the tiny brown scar on the green bowl so far below and tapped her slim muscular fingers on the peeled arm of the hand-made rocker.

For half an hour she sat so, her chin on her hand, thinking.

Then at last she straightened and called Minnie Pine from the inner regions.

"Send me Caldwell," she said briefly.

When presently the foreman came from the corrals and stood before her, his hat in his hand, his attitude one of strict attention, she spoke swiftly with a certain satisfaction.

When she had finished, he said, "Sure. It's a pretty long trick, but it can be done."

"Then do it," said Kate Cathrew, "when I give the word. We'll wait a little, however—

until the corn shows green from here. The better it looks one day the greater will be the contrast next. That's all."

"The devils are working in the Boss's head again," said Minnie Pine, who had listened behind the window, speaking to old Josefa in their polyglot Spanish and Pomo, "and hell's going to pop for the sun-woman on Nameless."

"How do you know?" asked the ancient dame, weaving a basket in dim green grasses.

"Because I heard what she said to Caldwell."

"You hear too much. An overloaded basket —breaks."

"Huh," grunted the half-breed, "the open eye sees game—for its owner's fattening."

"What are you two talkin' about?" asked the slim boy whom Big Baston had so nearly murdered that day on the porch, "always talkin' in that damned native tongue. Why don't you learn white man's talk, Minnie?"

The girl wheeled to him where he leaned in the kitchen door, and her comely dark face flushed with pleasure.

"Would you like me any better?"

"Sure," he said, "make you seem a little whiter anyway."

There was cruelty in the careless speech, and it did not miss its mark, though Minnie Pine's dark eyes gave no sign.

"The young-green-tree-with-the-rising-sun-behind it may want to talk the white man's tongue," said old Josefa grimly, "but she's a fool. All half-breeds are. They reap sorrow."

The boy laughed and his face came the nearest to wholesome youth of any at Sky Line. It still held something of softness, of humorous tolerance and good temper, as if not all its heritage of good intent had been warped away to wickedness.

His blue eyes regarded the big girl with approval, passing over her sleek black hair that shone like a crow's wing, her placid brow and unwavering dark eyes, her high cheeks and repressed thin lips.

"I'll give you a kiss, Minnie," he drawled, "for half that cream pie yonder."

Minnie looked at the pie and at Josefa, speaking swiftly.

The old woman nodded.

"If the mountain-stream wants to waste itself on the greedy sands," she said, "who am I to counsel otherwise? Yonder is the pie."

Minnie crossed the clean white floor and taking the pie from the window ledge where it sat cooling, divided it neatly. She fixed the two quarters on a plate from the cupboard and adding a fork, carried the whole to the boy.

She was the embodiment of the spirit of

womanhood since the world was—selling her service to man for love.

"Take it, Rod Stone," she said.

It was indicative of her race that she did not exact her payment first. It was sufficient that she serve. If the white man chose to pay, to keep his word, so much the better.

Stone took the plate and put one arm about the splendid broad shoulders.

Bending down he kissed the half-breed full on the lips—and for a second the black eyes glowed. Minnie Pine put a hand on his cheek with a caress infinitely soft.

"Humph," said Josefa, in English this time and pointedly, "I, too, have stood in the bend of a man's arm—but mine was a full-blood pomo. I did not live to cover my head and weep."

"Shut up, Josefa," said the boy laughing again, "neither will Minnie, through me."

At that moment the door to the south part of the house opened noiselessly, and Kate Cathrew stood there scanning the group with her keen glance.

"Stone," she said coldly, "is this the best you can do to earn your wages? Get out with the men—go quick. Minnie, if I see any more of this you'll go back where I got you. Josefa, what's the matter with your rule out here? Do

you let all the morning be wasted without care?''

Josefa gazed at her out of old eyes, calm with much looking on life, undisturbed.

''Not always,'' she answered, ''but I, too, have been young. Minnie will work better for the kiss.''

''Well,'' said Kate, ''you'd better see that she does.''

CHAPTER VII

THE SHADOWS THICKEN

Old man Conlan was, as McKane had said, half crazy with the loss of his cattle. They were not so many, only a matter of some twenty-two head, but they meant a lot to him. He owned no patented land. He was merely a squatter in the lower fringes of the Upper Country around at the western end of Mystery Ridge where Rainbow Cliff stopped spectacularly. He lived with his wife in a disreputable old cabin and worked beyond his years and strength in the white fire of an ambition—a laudable ambition, for he had a crippled son back East in college. He ran cattle in the hills and he knew every head of his brand to the last wobbly calf, an easy matter, since they were few.

At the store in Cordova he told his woes to the countryside, and he had an attentive audience, for his issue was theirs, and in a broader way.

On a pleasant day in late June, the old man reiterated his grievance, pulling his long grey beard and flailing his gaunt arms in eloquent gesture.

"Whoever they be that lifted my steers," he said grimly, "I damn their souls to hell! I'd damn their bodies, too, believe me, men, if I knowed 'em an' could throw my gun on 'em. Shuriff, here, might take me to jail next minute an' I'd go happy."

Selwood, sitting at a table desultorily playing cards, pushed back his hat and smiled.

"Nobody's going to take you to jail for killing a rustler, Jake," he said, "we'd give you a reward instead. I'd give a lot to have the chance myself."

"Why don't ye hunt fer it, then?" demanded Conlan testily, "ef I was shuriff——"

"Yes?" said Selwood, laying his cards flat on the table for a moment and facing him, "what would you do if you were sheriff?"

"I'd try, anyway," said the old man, with a touch of scorn, "to find a trace of somethin'. I'd not stay on my own ranch an' let th' world go hang! I'd ride th' hills, 'tenny rate."

A slow paleness crept into Selwood's face, giving it an odd ashen hue, like a candle. He laid down his hand definitely and looked round at the ten or twelve men lounging in the room.

Among them were Bossick and one or two others who had suffered at the hands of the mysterious thieves of Nameless.

"I know that Jake here voices the feeling

which has been growing against me for some time," he said evenly, "and this is as good a time as any to speak about it."

"You're our sheriff, Price, an' a damned good one," spoke up Bossick loyally, "an' I for one have nothing to say against you. I know—no one better—what you're up against. I trailed my own stuff into that river with you, an' I know that they simply vanished. I've done my own darndest to onravel th' mystery, an' I can't see what more any man'd do, sheriff or not!"

Selwood smiled at him.

"Thanks, John," he said, "I'll not forget that. But I hate to have my friends think I'm laying down on the job. I haven't said anything about what I've been doing, preferring to wait until I had something to show, but that time seems far off still. This is the smoothest work I ever saw, baffling——. I don't stand to simple reason. We know beef cattle don't fly—and yet that seems the only way they could have got out of the country. They go—and they leave no trail. I know, for I've ridden the hills, Jake, notwithstanding, in dragnet fashion. Ask my wife how many nights I've slept at home since the last raid. Take a look at my horse out there. He's hard as iron and lean as a rail. And there's another at home that looks just like him. If I haven't found anything it's not because I haven't traveled."

Several men stirred and one spoke.

"I don't think many of us blame you, Price," he said, "but it does gall a feller to lose stock an' have to stand helpless."

"And how do you think it galls me to fail to catch the lifters?" asked Selwood quietly. "It's my job—my—my honor."

He picked up his cards again and turned to the table.

"But no matter what is said, or thought, about me," he finished, "every day of my further hold on office will be given over to the same hunt—until I find what I'm after, or give up as a failure."

Hink Helsey, the bearded man who had sat on the store porch that day of the fight between Selwood and McKane, now dropped the forward legs of his chair to the floor and sat up, doubling his knife and putting it away in a pocket.

"Sheriff," he said, "I'm stackin' on you, along with Bossick. I think you'll ketch yer game—an' I think you're already on th' right trail."

McKane looked at him as if he could kill him and his tongue itched to flail both men, the speaker and Selwood, for he knew that they meant the same thing.

There was one listener, however, who said nothing and whose sharp eyes scanned each face

in the room with painstaking thoroughness. This was Sud Provine, a rider from Sky Line who had come down for the mail.

The Sky Line men never stayed long at Cordova, except as they came now and again for a night at play.

When the talk had changed from the all-absorbing topic of the stolen cattle, this worthy rose, took his sack and departed.

Several pairs of eyes followed him, but no one spoke of him.

There was something about the Sky Line riders which seemed to preclude discussion in the open.

Price Selwood had told the truth.

There was not a night of the long warming weeks of spring which had not seen him, a shadow in the shadows, riding the slopes and flats of Nameless. Sometimes he sat for hours high on some shoulder of the hills watching the bowl beneath with the moonlight sifting down in a silver flood. Again, when the nights were dark, he rode up under the very lip of Rainbow Cliff and watched and listened, his every sense as acute as a panther's. There were times when he sat for half a night within hailing distance of Kate Cathrew's stronghold, and once her dogs, winding him, yammered excitedly. This brought

out a stealthy listener, whose only betrayal was the different note in the dogs' voices.

But someone was there in the darkness of the veranda, and Selwood outstayed him, whoever he was—outstayed the animals' excitement, their curiosity, and left with the hint of coming dawn to drop back down the slants and sleep the day away at home.

Night again saw him travelling, and always his one obsession travelled with him—the hard-and-fast presentiment that Kate Cathrew was the tangible element in the smoke-screen of mystery which rode the country.

It was not long after the talk at the store, perhaps a week or such a matter, when he got the first faint inkling of a clue. It was scarcely more, yet it served to sharpen his wits to a razor edge. It was not moonlight, neither was it clear dark of the moon, but that vague time in between when a pale sickle sailed the vault and shed its half-light to make shadows ghostly and substance illusive.

Selwood had ridden all the lower reaches of Nameless that week, had skirted the western end of Mystery and even trailed far into the Deep Hearts themselves in an effort to find something, anything, which might tell him he was at least on the right track.

He hardly knew what it was for which he searched—perhaps an old trail, perhaps a secret

branding fire. But he had found nothing. So he fell back on his night riding again, and as always this led him instinctively into the region of Sky Line Ranch. He had crossed the river near the head of Nance Allison's tilled land, and had sat a moment peering down the length of the brown stretch where the rows of young corn were springing bravely.

It pleased the sheriff to see this promise of a fair crop, for he knew the girl, and had known her father for an honest, straighforward man. The hard effort of the family to get along was known to all the ranchers and earned its mead of admiration in a land where work was regarded almost as a religion.

Nameless could condone wrong, but not shiftlessness.

And this girl was not shiftless.

Instead her sharp management and her heavy labor were matters of note. So the sheriff took special cognizance of the look of her big field of corn and nodded in pleased satisfaction.

"Too bad she lost those six steers," he told himself, "they'd have helped a lot in her year's furnishing. Game young pair."

Then he moved on up into the blue-brush that clothed the slants by the river and made for the heights.

Three hours later he was sitting sidewise in his saddle beside the well-worn trail which led

up to Sky Line. He was not too close, being ensconced in a little thicket of maple about fifty yards back and above. He had spent many an hour here before.

It afforded a good view of the trail, and better still, a splendid chance to hear.

Twice in the last month he had heard and seen a bunch of Kate's riders coming home from Cordova where they had gone to gamble. But this fact had been unproductive of anything sinister.

They had ridden boldly, as behooves innocent men, their horses climbing slowly with rattle of spur and bit-chain, the squeak and whine of saddles.

Selwood had reached a hand to his horse's nose to preclude its neighing, and had seen them pass on up and disappear.

Next day he had unostentatiously made sure that these men had played at McKane's—in both instances.

And now he waited again, seemingly in a foolish quest.

He knew it would seem so to an observer. It seemed so to him when he regarded it with reason. But reason was not actuating him. It was instinct—hunch.

So Sheriff Price Selwood—whom Kate Cathrew quite frankly hated—sat in the darkness and watched and listened beside her trail, a lost

little thread on the vast expanse of the wooded slopes.

A long hour passed, filled with the soundful silence of the wilderness. He heard an owl call and call in mournful quaver from far below, another answer. He knew that some hunting animal was abroad in the manzanita to his right, for he caught a thud and rustle, the pitiful, shrill scream of a rabbit. A night bird gave out a sweet, alert note from time to time and an insect drummed in a pine tree.

And then he heard, or thought he did, another sound.

It was so far off and faint that he could not be sure, and for a time he fancied he might have been mistaken. Then it came again—the crack of hoofs on stone, and once more silence.

He held his breath, listening.

Once again he heard that cracking of hoofs—and this time he knew them for cloven hoofs. A cattle-brute was coming up the trail toward him. There was nothing in that fact to cause undue excitement—except one thing.

Under ordinary conditions that steer would be lying in some snug glade chewing its cud. In no natural case would it be coming up a trail at a smart pace—with a horse behind it!

And there *was* a horse behind it.

Selwood heard now distinctly the quieter step of a saddle horse.

He leaned forward, gripping his own mount's nose, and strained his eyes in the illusive half-light. Presently he saw what he knew he would see—a rider, driving one lone steer up the trail to Sky Line.

It was too dark to see anything else—who the man was, or what manner of steer he drove, or what horse he rode.

And though he waited till the cooler breath of the night warned him of coming day he saw nothing more.

He spent half the next day at Cordova, listening, but though several cattlemen came in there was nothing said of a loss among them.

But the day after old man Conlan was in and fit for durance.

He threw his ragged hat on McKane's floor and jumped on it, reviling the law and all it stood for.

"Two more!" he bellowed with a break of tears in his old voice. "By ——! ef this ain't th' limit! I only had sixteen left an' th' two best out th' lot come up missin' this mornin'! Ain't no trail agin. They's tracks all over, sure—but th' other stock is on th' slope an' this time there just ain't *nothin'!*"

Barman, from up on Nameless, was at the store and he and McKane tried to calm the old man down, though the cattleman's own blood was roiled.

"It is a damned dirty shame!" he said indignantly, "have you told Selwood?"

"Him?" grunted Conlan. "Hell!"

"He's here now," said McKane, "just getting down."

Price Selwood entered in time to hear the last of the old man's tirade, to catch the drift of what had happened, and his eyes glowed for a second.

He laid a hand on Conlan's arm.

"Jake," he said, "hold in a little longer."

"Hold hell!" said the other shaking off the hand, "I'll be ready for the county house in Bement in another three months!"

"I don't think so, Jake," said the sheriff quietly, "tell me — were those two steers branded?"

"Course. Plain as day. J.C. on right hip, swaller-fork in left ear. One was roan an' tother a bay-spot."

Selwood turned without a word, left the store, mounted and rode away.

"Jest like him!" said Conlan bitterly, "goes a'ridin' off all secret-like an' snappy—'s if he knowed somethin' or wanted us to think he did."

"Mebby he does," said Barman.

Sheriff Selwood rode straight up to Sky Line Ranch. It took him a good three hours, going fast, and it was far after noon when he pulled

rein at Kate Cathrew's corral gate and called for her.

She came, frowning and inhospitable.

"What do you want of me?" she asked coldly.

"Nothing," said Selwood, "except to tell you I'm going to take a look around your place."

"Look and be damned!" she flared. "What do you think you'll find?"

"Well—" he drawled, smiling, "I might find a couple of steers branded with J.C. on the right hip."

For one fraction of a second the black eyes burning sombrely on his flickered, lost their direct steadiness.

Selwood laughed, though he was alert in every nerve and his right hand was on his thigh near to the butt of the gun that hung there. Caldwell and several other riders stood close, their eyes on him. He thought of John Allison, found dead at the foot of Rainbow Cliff, to all intents the victim of accident.

"What's the matter, Kate?" he asked pointedly. "Suffering from nerves? Didn't think you had any."

And he turned to ride over toward the corral.

Kate's flaming orbs sought the face of her foreman.

"Go with him," they telegraphed, and Caldwell went.

Selwood covered every foot of the home place of Sky Line in a grim silence, looking for anything. He looked into corral and stable, brush pasture and branding pen, but found no sign of the stolen steers.

When at last he rode away it was straight down along the face of Rainbow Cliff toward the west. He did not know why he skirted the rock-face, since it was hard going. The earth at the foot of the great precipice was slanting and covered with the loose stone that was forever falling from the weathered wall. It was rough on his horse's feet, but he held him to it—and he was surprised to find that Caldwell was still with him, and riding inside next to the Cliff.

"Think I need escort, Caldwell?" he asked sarcastically.

"Mebby as much as we need spyin' on," returned the other and rode along.

Three miles further on the sheriff turned down the mountain and the foreman reined up, sitting in silence to watch him out of sight.

"Wings is right," said Selwood to himself, "those steers must have them—but that woman's eyes were guilty, or I'm a liar."

At the same moment Caldwell was heaving a long breath of relief as he pulled his horse around and headed home.

"This here sheriff is gettin' a little bit inquisitive," he thought, then grinned sardonically.

"But if he never gets any wiser than he is now he won't set anything on fire. In fifteen feet of th' Flange an' never saw a thing! Holy smoke! Some sheriff! An' yet—can't blame him—the Flange'd fool th' devil himself."

CHAPTER VIII

BRAND FAIR

Nance Allison went back to Blue Stone Cañon. It was as inevitable as the recurrent sun that she should do so. Her whole nature was stirred to the depths by what she had found in the lonely gorge.

The mystery of the thing lured her, set her young mind hunting for its solution. And the little ragged boy with his weazened face and bright brown eyes tugged at her tender heart irresistibly.

He was a beautiful, small creature despite his thinness and his poverty. There was intelligence in the broad forehead under the long, loose, unkempt, dark curls, capacity for affection in the mobile lips and a terrible hunger for love in the whole little face.

For four days, "hand-running" as her mother said, the girl went to the cañon. The friendship ripened with tropical speed, so that she need not search for her quarry now, but found it coming to meet her, peering around this boulder, watching from that vantage point.

When she held out her arms to the child these last two times he had come leaping into them to cling to her neck in delirious gladness, while the sedate Collie, fast friend by this time and traitor to his sacred charge, fawned on her knee.

But on the fifth golden day trouble was in the atmosphere.

Sonny came with drooping head and a pucker of sorrow in his small brows.

"Why, what's the matter with my little man?" said the girl, kneeling and holding him off to scan him searchingly. "Tell Nance, Sonny. What is it?"

And Sonny, dissolved in tears upon the instant, hiding his face in Nance's neck.

"I—I had—" he hiccoughed, "to—to tell—Brand—a a—lie! A nawful lie! And Brand, he —hates a liar!"

"A lie! Why, how—why——"

"He found your horse's tracks down the cañon and—he asked me if I saw—any—any one strange," wept the child.

Nance sat down and took the boy in her lap.

The thing was coming to a climax.

She was meddling with someone's private business, of that she was sure, both from her own reasoning and her mother's warning, and maybe she had no right to do so, but her sweet mouth set itself into stubborn lines as she fell

to smoothing the little head, damp with the ardours of its owner's remorse.

"Stop crying, honey," she wheedled softly, "and let Nance rock you like this."

She tucked her heels under her thighs and, holding the child in the comfortable lap thus formed, began to sway her body back and forth for all the world as if she sat in a cushioned rocker.

What is there about a rocking woman with a child's head on her breast to soothe the sorrows of the world?

The swaying motion soon checked Sonny's sobs and she fell to singing to him, adding her voice to the mysterious voices of the cañon in the lilt and fall of an old camp-meeting hymn brought forth from her memories of Missouri. And presently, when its spell had soothed the tumult, she raised him up and fed him cookies made for the occasion, a sugary bribe if ever there was one.

Dirk, too, was not averse to this shameful seduction, his pale eyes glowing with desire.

"Tell me, Sonny," said Nance, "does Brand cook for you?"

"Sure," said the child, "sure he does—but he's gone all day and we get awful hungry 'fore he comes at night."

"I should think so!" thought Nance grimly, "two meals a day! When a little child should

eat whenever it's hungry, to grow! This precious Brand is about due for an investigation."

Aloud she said:

"Sonny, I'm going to stay with you all day —and I'm going to wait and see Brand."

The boy was aghast at this statement, and it was plain from the distress he showed that it was unprecedented.

"If you do," he said miserably, "maybe Brand will take me away again and—and I'll never see you any more."

But Nance had other plans and she shook her head.

That was a lovely day. It was warmer than usual, since summer was stepping down the slopes of the lonely hills, and the strangely assorted trio in Blue Stone Cañon enjoyed it to the full.

They explored far up the narrow defile, the child holding to the girl's hand and skipping happily, the Collie pacing beside them, a step to the left, two steps to the rear.

They watched the trout waving in the sunlit pools at noon, and waded in a riffle to find barnacles under rocks that Nance might show Sonny the tiny creature which built such a wonderful little house of infinitesimal sticks and mortar.

But as the sun dropped over toward the west and the shadows deepened in the great gorge,

Nance began to feel the loneliness, the cold silence, the oppression of the unpeopled wilderness.

The voices seemed to raise their tones, to become menacing. More and more she realized what it must mean to a child left alone in the cañon, and a deep and rising indignation swelled within her.

This Brand fellow, now—he must be cold-blooded as they made them, cruel—no, Sonny loved him. He could not be exactly that.

But what sort of man could he be?

She held the child close in her warm arms as she rocked again and pondered the problem. She did not know what she intended to say to him, once she faced him, but of one thing she was certain—he would know, in no uncertain terms, indeed, what a monstrous thing it was to leave a child alone in Blue Stone Cañon—alone, to listen to its mysterious voices, to feel its chill and its menace of shadows!

Why, it was a wonder the little mind did not crack with strain, the small heart break with fear!

Unconsciously she hugged Sonny tighter, making of her body, as it were, a bulwark between him and all harm, seeming to challenge the world for his possession. It was astonishing how the child had crept into her heart in these

few short days—how hungrily her arms had closed about him. She had made his cause her own high-handedly—perhaps without reason.

She was thinking of these things when the Collie barked sharply and leaped away in welcome. Nance flung a startled glance over her shoulder—and got to her feet, sliding the boy down beside her, an arm still about his ragged shoulders.

A man stood at the corner of the jut of stone beyond the pool.

He was tall, somewhere around six feet, a horseman born by his build, narrow of hip and flat of thigh. He was clad in garments almost as much the worse for wear as Sonny's—a blue flannel shirt and corduroy tucked into boots. But Nance saw in that first swift glance that these habiliments were different from those of their like which McKane sold in Cordova, that seemed made for the man who wore them, so perfectly had they fitted him once.

Under a peaked sombrero with a chin-strap run in a bone slide, a pair of dark eyes bored into Nance's, unsmiling. A very dark face, almost Indian in clean-cut feature and contour, with repressed lips and thin nostrils, completed the picture.

The newcomer did not speak, but stood holding the bit of a handsome, huge, black horse.

"Brand!" called the boy, "Oh, Brand!"

At that name Nance Allison found her tongue.

"I've been waiting for you," she said calmly, "I'm glad you've come."

"Yes?" he said in a singularly deep, sweet voice.

That voice disconcerted Nance upon the instant, stole some of her fire, so to speak. She had been ready to tackle him on the issue at once, to fight, if necessary, with a flood of reasons and protests against his treatment of Sonny.

Now, suddenly, she felt a vague sense of having intruded, of meddling with another's affairs. But she was not one to back down from any righteous stand—and Sonny's cause was righteous in every sense, it seemed to her.

So she gazed steadily into the direct dark eyes and nodded decidedly.

"Yes—I am," she repeated, "I—want to talk to you."

The man dropped the rein over the black's head and came forward a step or two.

"Quite a rare experience," he said, smiling, as he removed his hat and ran his brown fingers through the thick black hair that stood up from his sweated forehead, "it's been a long time since any woman has wanted to talk to us—eh, Sonny?"

"But—Oh, she talks sweet, Brand!" cried the child eagerly, "and she—holds me on her lap!"

At the profound awe in the small voice the man's face grew quickly grave.

"We must be pretty far gone as vagabonds!" he said, "that makes me think what a woman's love must mean to a child. You have been a gift of God, dropped out of the blue to Sonny, Miss Allison, and I ought to thank you."

"Why—you—you know who I am?" cried the girl, astounded.

"Certainly. And I know how long you've been coming here to the cañon. I know where you live, too—down on the flats by the river."

His slow, amused smile at her evident discomfiture was engaging. It disarmed Nance, made her feel more than ever an intruder.

"I know what lost waifs you must think us—and you are partly right. We are. I've watched you with Sonny twice, and I have not removed our camp—if such it could be called—because I didn't think you'd talk."

"I haven't," said Nance, "except to my own family."

"Since you have found us out," he went on, "I shall tell you that Sonny is not the neglected little cast-off that you must naturally think him. I have hidden him here for a purpose. We have a purpose, the boy and I, and we have traveled many miles in its pursuit. We do seem mysterious—but we're not so greatly so, after all. I

try to care for him as best I may when I must be so much away from him. If it wasn't for Dirk I couldn't leave him as I do."

"He's well protected," said Nance, "I used Sonny himself to betray the dog. I couldn't do otherwise."

"I know something of it—Sonny didn't tell me, but I saw the signs of your scuffle. It was printed plain in the sand and shale."

"No—Sonny didn't tell," said Nance regretfully, "and I made him a liar—when I didn't mean to. I asked him not to tell you that I'd been here. I was afraid you'd take him away. I didn't think you'd ask him point blank."

"I've taught the boy not to talk," said the man—"it's a vital necessity to us."

"He doesn't. I couldn't find out a thing, for all I wheedled shamelessly, except that you were Brand, and that you two ride always on Diamond there."

"My name is Fair, Miss Allison—Brand Fair, and that is Sonny's name also. But—we don't tell it to strangers."

He smiled at her again, a slow creasing of the lines about his lips, a pleasant narrowing of his eyes.

"Then I—" there was an elemental quality of gladness in Nance's voice, though she was utterly unconscious of it, "am not a stranger?"

"You are Sonny's friend," he replied, "and we give you our trust."

The girl swallowed once and tightened her hold on the child's thin shoulders. There was something infinitely pathetic, infinitely intriguing in this situation, and it gripped her strongly.

"I—thank you," she said awkwardly, "I'll not betray it."

"I'm sure you won't," said Brand Fair, "and for the present, if you'll accept us at our face value, we'll be mighty glad—eh, Sonny?"

"I've been glad all the time," said Sonny fervently, "and so's Dirk."

"Ingrates!" laughed the man. "Here I've shared my poor substance with you two for—a very long time—and at the first bribe of meat and kisses you turn me down cold!"

"Oh!" cried Nance, flushing, "you know *all* about us!"

"It's my business to know all about one who invades my solitude, isn't it?"

But here Sonny could stand Brand's badinage no longer and pulling away from Nance he ran to him, and clinging about his knees, begged forgiveness for the lie whose memory troubled his clear little soul.

The man touched the unkempt small head with a tender hand. "Sure, old-timer," he said gently; "that's all right. A gentleman must lie

when a lady commands—he couldn't do anything else."

"You make me feel like a sinner!" said Nance, "I hope you'll forgive me, too."

The man took Sonny's hand as she made ready to leave and turned down the cañon with her.

"We'll form a guard-of-honor in token of that," he said, "and in seeing you off we'll invite you back again. Sonny would miss you now, you know. But just remember always, Miss Allison, please—that in a way we're keeping out of sight—until—until some time in an uncertain future. Consider us a secret, will you not?"

Nance Allison rode home to Nameless with her head in a whirl. Life, that had seemed to pass her by in her plodding labor and her patient bearing of trouble, had suddenly touched her with a flaming finger.

She had found mystery and affection in the silence of Blue Stone Cañon—and now there was something else, a strange vibrant element, thin as ether and intangible as wind, a sense of elation, of excitement. She felt a surge within her of some nameless fire, an uplift, a peculiar gladness.

"Mammy," she said straightly when she stepped in at the cabin door, "I've found the man!"

"Whew! Some statement, Sis!" cried Bud as he shambled across the sill behind her. "What's he like?"

"Why—I don't just know. He's tall—and he wears clothes that have once been fine—and he has the straightest eyes I ever saw. His name's Fair—Brand Fair—and he's some relation to Sonny, for that is his name, too."

"I hope you gave him that piece of your mind you laid out to?" pursued Bud.

"Why, no—no," said Nance wonderingly, looking at him with half-seeing eyes, "I don't—believe—I did!"

Mrs. Allison looked up from her work of getting supper at the stove.

"I mind me," she said, "of the first time I ever set eyes on your Pappy. I was goin' to frail him good because he'd run his saddle horse a-past th' cart I was drivin', kickin' a terrible dust all over my Sunday dress—it was camp-meetin' at Sharfell's Corners—an' then—he laughed an' talked to me—an' I forgot my mad spell. His eyes jest coaxed th' wrath out of my heart—then an' ever after."

"Why, Mammy," said Nance, "that's just what happened here! This man talked to me and I forgot my mad spell! I never said a thing I'd stayed to say! And I promised to keep the secret of him and Sonny in the cañon."

"H'm!" said Bud as he sidled into his chair and smoothed his bronze hair, wet from his ablutions at the well, "H'm—Mammy, why'd you tell her that? I wish you hadn't."

"Why?" said Nance, but her brother shook his head.

CHAPTER IX

GOLDEN MAGIC

SOMETHING had happened to Nance Allison. For the first time in her healthy young life sleep refused to visit her. Even her terrible grief at the death of her father had given way to sleep at last and she had forgotten her tragedy for a blessed time.

But on the night following her interview with the strange man of the cañon she was wide awake till dawn.

She was not uncomfortable. She did not think she was ill. But an odd inner warmth surged all through her, a pleasant fire ran in her veins. She lay in her bed with her hands beneath her head and thought over and over each phase of the day she had spent with Sonny, each incident that had led up to the appearance of Brand Fair. Then, with a peculiar delight, she went over his every word, every movement. She remembered the look of his brown hand on the black horse's bit, the tilt of his hat, the way the chin-strap lay along his lean, dark cheek. She recalled the direct glance of his eyes, the slow smile that creased his lips' corners.

He was like no other man she had ever seen. There was a sweetness in the tones of his deep voice, a sense of restfulness and strength about him. He seemed to fit in with her dreams of the best things to be had in life—like lace curtains and the rag carpet which was slowly growing in her Mammy's hands.

His name, too—Brand Fair. She liked the sound of it.

And it was Sonny's name. Suddenly she sat bolt upright, staring at the darkness. Fair—Sonny Fair! Could it be that Brand was Sonny's father? For some inexplicable reason a cold hand seemed to clutch her heart, a feeling of disaster to encompass her.

"Now why" she asked herself slowly, "should that make any difference? Wouldn't he be just as nice—just as pleasant to talk to?"

She sat a long time holding her two braids in her hands, twirling the ends around her fingers, thinking.

Why was she so pleased with this stranger, she wondered?

She had seen many men in her life—there were the cowboys from the Upper Country whom she saw at Cordova, nearly every time she went there, there was McKane, and Sheriff Price Selwood.

She liked the sheriff. He was a kindly man under his stern exterior, she knew. His eyes

were direct, like Fair's somewhat, and he had the same seeming of quiet strength. He had been at the cabin quite a few times after her father's death, asking all sorts of questions about his manner of life, his experience in the hills, and so forth. Yes—Fair was a little like the sheriff, only more so—oh, very much more so—quiet, steady, one whose word you would take without question.

He was different, that was all—different.

He had not always lived in the hills, that was certain. She lay down once more and tried to sleep, but her eyes would not obey her will. They came open each time she closed them to see this man standing at the jut of stone, his hand on the black's bit—at the pool by the cave below where he bade her good-bye—still there when she looked back from far down the cañon.

She heard Old John, the big plymouth-rock rooster, crow for midnight from his perch in the rafters of the stable—and again at false-dawn a little while before daylight.

"Well, I'd like to know what ails me," she thought to herself as she got up with the first grey shafts above Mystery Ridge, "I never stayed awake all night in my life before."

It was indicative of the great good health and strength there was in her that she felt no ill effects from the unusual experience. She brushed her hair and pinned it neatly around her head

in a shining coronet, put on a clean denim dress from the clothes-press in the corner, laced up the heavy shoes she had to wear about her man's work, and went softly out to light the kitchen fire, to draw a fresh pail of water and to stand lost in rapt adoration of the pageant of coming day. She washed her face and hands in the basin and came blooming from the cold water, content with her lot, happy to be alive—and to know that Brand and Sonny Fair were in Blue Stone Cañon, and that they called themselves her friends.

She had never had a special friend before—not since those far-back little-girl days in Missouri.

"Mammy," she said at breakfast, "I never slept a wink last night. I kept thinking about Sonny and Brand all the time—wondering why they're hiding, and what relation they are, and why they live so hard and poor like. It seems dreadful, don't it?"

"Seems funny, if you ask me," said Bud shortly, "maybe this Brand feller knows something of all this rustling that's been going on up and down Nameless."

Nance laid down her knife and fork and looked at him.

"Of all things, Bud!" she said, "it's not like you to cast the first stone. And you've never seen this man's face, or you wouldn't say that."

"Well, I'm not so sure of it," returned the

boy, "I hate to see you take up so with a stranger."

"I trust your feelin' for him, Nance," said Mrs. Allison, "somehow there's somethin' in a woman's heart when she looks into a man's eyes, most times, which sets th' stamp on him for good or bad. Seems like it's seventh sense which th' Almighty gives us woman-kind for a safeguard. I trust it."

"I guess I do, too, Mammy," said Nance, "leastways I felt to trust Brand Fair the first minute I laid eyes on him. He's different."

Mrs. Allison said no more, but she was thinking back over the long years to that camp-meeting time when she had meant to "frail" the stranger, young John Allison, and how his smiling eyes had coaxed her angry heart to peace—a peace which stayed with her always, through hardship and poverty, through many Western moves, and which softened now the sorrow of his absence. John Allison had seemed to her "different" also.

For some subconscious reason Nance stayed away from the cañon for several days. She busied herself with odd jobs about the place. She mended the wire fence around the big flat where the wild hay was waving thick, its green floor flowing with sheets of silver where the light winds swept, and gave the harness a thorough oiling.

As she sat in the barn door running the straps back and forth through her hands she cast smiling eyes out at her field of corn.

"It's going to be a big crop, Bud," she said, "there'll be three ears on every stalk and they're mighty strong. We'll pull the suckers next week and cultivate it again in ten days more—and you just watch it grow and wave its green banners."

"It's already waving them," said Bud working beside her, "it sure looks fine."

There was the pride of possession in the two young faces, the quiet joy of satisfaction in simple work well done and its reward.

"I hope," said the girl dreamily, "I *hope,* Bud, that there'll be enough left over after we pay McKane to get the carpet woven. Mammy's got nearly enough balls already, and we can take it in to Bement in the early fall and go back after it about two weeks later."

Bud's eyes sparkled.

"Gee! But that would be good," he said wistfully, "a regular holiday. I'd like to see a town again."

"One trip I'd go with you and the next we'd make Mammy go. It'd set her up, give her something to think about all winter," planned Nance, "she don't get out like we do."

So they looked ahead to the meagre joys of their poor life and were happy.

Two days later Nance again rode Buckskin to the cañon, and this time she went in the afternoon.

The eager gladness of the child, the vociferous welcome of the Collie, gave her a feeling of guilt that she had stayed away so long, and she made glowing holiday with her cookies, her songs and her laughter, so that the hours flew on magic wings—and Brand came home before they were even beginning to look for him.

He came upon them silently, as he had done before, and Nance sprang up in confusion.

"How do you always get here so quietly?" she asked, "I never heard a sound."

"Look at Diamond," he replied smilingly, "we always follow the water. A stream leaves no tell-tale tracks. Even Sonny can swim like a fish."

Nance sobered quickly.

A disturbing thought of Bud's remark about rustlers came into her mind—and she thought of those ninety steers of Bossick's driven into Nameless and whisked out of the country. Of course ninety head of cattle couldn't go down the big river indefinitely—but she didn't like the suggestion.

"No," she said, "it don't. That's what the rustlers seem to think."

She looked him square in the eyes, and was satisfied.

There was no consciousness in those smiling depths, not the faintest flicker of a shadow. Whatever mystery might attach to him, this man felt nothing personal in her speech.

And so she sat down again with Sonny in her lap and Brand sat down opposite, and they fell to talking there in the whispering silence, while the late sun gilded the high blade of the rim-rock and the cool shadows deepened in the gorge. It was strange fairy-land to Nance, and all the inner country of her spirit shone and sparkled under a fire of stars. She had never felt so before—never known the half-tremulous excitement which filled her now.

When this man spoke she listened avidly, her blue eyes on his face. He seemed the visible embodiment of all she had missed in life, the cities, the open seas, the distant lands and the pleasures. As he sat before her in his worn garments which might have denoted a poverty as great as hers, he seemed rich beyond compare, a potentate of the world. He smoked small brown cigarettes which he made from a little old leather pouch and rolled with the dexterity of long usage, and he buried each stub carefully in the sand.

He was a marvellous person, indeed, and Nance regarded him in a sort of awe.

"I've been in to Cordova a time or two," he said casually, "and have met the sheriff and

several others. To them I'm a prospector. There seems to be a lot of unrest in the country."

"It's the rustlers," said Nance, "a lot of cattle have disappeared, and some folks blame the sheriff. I don't. I think he does all he can. It's a great mystery. We lost some ourselves. I've ridden myself down looking for them, and so has my brother, Bud, and we've never found a hoof-mark."

"Strange. Isn't there any one you might suspect in these hills?"

"I've heard that Sheriff Selwood is watching Kate Cathrew, but the others laugh at him."

Fair's eyes narrowed just a fraction of an inch.

"Cathrew?" he said. "Who's she?"

"The woman who owns Sky Line Ranch," returned Nance grimly, "and my enemy."

"What? Your enemy? How's that?"

"Simple as two and two. She's a cattle queen—they call her Cattle Kate Cathrew—and she runs her stock on the slopes of Mystery. She's rich—lives in a wonderful house up under the edge of Rainbow Cliff, and rides a beautiful horse. Her saddle alone is worth my team and harness—my new harness that I had to buy to take the place of the one that somebody cut to pieces in the night. She wants our land—our great fine flats on Nameless that'd feed her cattle through. She's always wanted it. She

tried to scare my father off, and since he was found dead at the foot of Rainbow she's tried to scare us off—Bud and Mammy and I. But we don't scare," she finished bitterly, "not worth a cent."

Brand Fair leaned forward, and this time his eyes had lost their pleasant smile, and had narrowed to slits. The fingers that held his cigarette were tense.

"Tell me," he said, "what does this woman look like? I've heard of her a little, but I've never been able—I've never seen her."

"She's handsome," said Nance frankly, "not large, but pretty-made as you find them. She has black hair and black eyes and a mouth as red as a flower, and she is always frowning. She's a good shot—so good that I'm not much scared when she sands a ball whining over my head as I plow my field."

"Good God!" shot out Fair, "does she do that?"

Nance nodded.

"She's done so twice. She's my enemy, I tell you. And so are all her riders. Strange things have happened to us—bitter things. There was the rope in the trail that threw Bud down the gulch—he's never walked straight since. There was the fire that took my last year's hay—and there was the harness. It seems I can't forgive that harness—it set us

back in debt to McKane at the store. Bud—Bud—he's out of it. There could be no thought of forgiveness in that. If I was a man—just an ordinary man——"

The girl leaned forward with a doubled fist striking the cañon's floor.

"If I was a man and knew who stretched that rope—I'm deadly afraid I'd kill him."

Fair nodded in understanding.

"I fear that in me," Nance went on earnestly, "that thing which seems to flare and make me hot all over when I think of Bud. I pray against it every night of my life. Mammy says it's feud in my heart—and I say so, too."

For a long time the man studied her face.

"Yes," he said presently, "there's something in you that would fight—but it would take something terrible to break it loose from leash—some cataclysmic emergency."

"Danger," she said quickly, "that's what'd loose it, danger to some one I love, like Bud or Mammy. I know it, and am afraid."

"Why afraid?" asked Fair quietly, "if you had to do it, why fear the necessary issue?"

"Because," she answered solemnly, "the Bible says 'Thou shalt not kill.'"

A certain embarrassment seemed to overtake the man for a moment and he dropped his eyes to his cigarette, turning it over and over in his fingers.

"That's as you look at it, I suppose," he said, "to every person his limits and inhibitions."

"But let's not talk of feuds and killings," said Nance, laughing brightly as she hugged the child and rubbed his tousled head. "What do you think of our country—Nameless River and the Deep Heart hills?"

"Beautiful. Sonny and I have traveled over many a thousand miles in the last two years, and we have yet to see a place more lovely—or lonely."

"And can you hear the voices in the cañon? You have to be still a long time—and then, after a while, they get louder and louder, as if a great concourse of people were talking all at once."

"You have a strange and weird conception, Miss Allison," said Fair, "but I know what you mean. We hear them at night, Sonny and I."

"And that's what I want to speak about, Mr. Fair," said Nance hesitatingly, "I've thought at nights about Sonny—alone—hearing the voices. Have you thought what it might mean to a child?"

The man smoked awhile in silence.

"Yes," he said at last, "I have. But it seems unavoidable. I have no place else to leave him."

"Leave him with me!" she cried, stretching out a hand imploringly, "Oh, leave him with me—please! I'd take such good care of him."

But Brand Fair shook his head.

"It does not seem advisable, much as I appreciate your offer. I cannot tell you how much I do appreciate it—but—I don't want any one to know that I have Sonny—that he is in the country at all."

Nance gazed at him wonderingly.

"I don't understand it," she said slowly, "but you know best. Perhaps it is best that I don't understand."

"Perhaps," said Fair; "but I hope you'll come to see us often—maybe some day you'll take a ride with us up to the head of Blue Stone. I do quite a bit of exploring around and about. Will you come?"

Nance's face flushed with frank pleasure. "Why, I'd love it," she said. "We'll cut up through Little Blue and I'll show you Grey Spring and the Circle. Bud and I named them. We found them three years ago."

"Then we'll consider ourselves engaged, eh, Sonny?" smiled Fair. "Engaged to Miss Allison for a long day's ride?"

"And will you bring some more cookies?" asked the boy lifting eager eyes to his adored.

"Honey," said Nance, kneeling to kiss him good-bye, since she was making ready to leave, "Nance'd bring you anything she's got or could get. She'll bring us all a whole big lunch."

"Old-timer," said Fair severely, "I'm

ashamed of you. We'll furnish some fish ourselves.''

He held out a hand and the girl laid her own in it.

For a little space they stood so, smiling into each other's eyes and neither knew that magic was working among the gathering shadows. They seemed to be old friends, as if they had known each other ages back, and the grip of their hands was a kindly thing, familiar.

Then a sudden confusion took the girl and she drew her fingers quickly away.

''I'll come,'' she said, ''next week—on Tuesday morning—early.''

''Good,'' said Fair, ''we'll be all ready.''

CHAPTER X

THE SEVENTH SENSE

They were as good as their word, and when Nance rode up the narrow defile on the day and hour appointed, they were waiting, fresh and neat as abundant water and their worn garments would permit.

Sonny wore denim overalls a shade less ragged and a little shirt with sleeves. His face shone like the rising sun from behind Fair's shoulder as they sat decorously mounted on Diamond.

"The out-riders wait the Princess," said Fair, "good morning, Miss Allison."

"Did you bring cookies?" queried the boy eagerly, "we've got the fish!"

"Good morning," answered Nance, "sure I did, Sonny. And other things, too. We'll be good and hungry by noon time."

The sun was two hours high outside, but here between the towering walls the shadows were still blue and cold. The murmur of the stream seemed louder than usual, heard thus in the stillness of the early day. The mystery of the great cut was accentuated, its charm intensified

a thousandfold to Nance. There was a strange excitement in everything, a sense of holiday and impending joy. Her face broke into smiles as helplessly as running water dimples, and when the two riding ahead turned from time to time to look back she was fair as "a garden of the Lord," her bronze head shining bare in the blue light, her eyes as wide and clear as Sonny's own.

This was adventure to Nance—the first she had ever known, and its heady wine was stirring in her veins.

She did not know why the tumbling stream sang a different song, or why the glow of light creeping down from the rimrock along the western wall seemed more golden than before.

She only knew that where her heart had lain in her breast calm and content with her labor and her majestic environment of hills and river, there was now a strange surge and thrill which made her think of the stars that sang together at the morning of creation. Surely her treasured Book had something for each phase of human life—comfort for its sorrows, divine approval for its happiness.

So she rode, smiling, her hands folded on her pommel, listening to Brand Fair's easy speech, watching his shoulders moving lithely under the blue flannel shirt, comparing him to the men she knew and wondering again why he was not like them.

They followed the stream sometimes, and again trotted across flat, hard, sandy spaces where the floor of the cañon widened, and passed now and again the mouths of smaller cuts diverging from the main one.

"About two miles from here," she told Fair, "we leave Blue Stone and take up Little Blue to the left. At its head lie Grey Spring and the Circle. We'll make it about noon."

The sun was well down in the great gorge when they reached the opening of Little Blue, and in this smaller cañon which diverged sharply at right angles, its golden light flooded to the dry bottom.

"Little Blue has no water to speak of," said Nance, "only holes here and there—but they are funny places, deep and full, and they seem to come up from the bottom and go down somewhere under the sand. They have current, for if you throw anything in them it will drift about, slow, and finally go down and never come up."

"Subterranean flow," said Fair, "I've seen other evidence of it in this country. Must have been volcanic sometime."

The gorge lifted and widened and presently they passed several of these strange pools, set mysteriously in the shelving floor.

The towering walls fell away and they had the feeling of coming up into another world. Soil

began to appear in place of the abundant blue sand, and trees and grass clothed the floor in ever increasing beauty.

Fair drew Diamond up and waited until Nance rode alongside and they went forward into a tiny country set in the ridging rock of the shallowed cañon to where Grey Spring whispered at the edge of the Circle.

"See!" cried Nance waving a hand about at the smiling scene, "it is a magic place—no less!"

The spring itself was a narrow trickle above sands as grey as cloth, a never-ceasing flow of water, clear and icy cold, and beyond it was a round little flat, thick with green grass beneath spreading mush-oaks, a spot for fairy conclaves.

"Yes," nodded the man, "it is magic—the true magic of Nature in gracious perfection, unmarred by the hand of man."

"Are we going to have the cookies now?" came the anxious pipe of the boy, and Fair laughed.

"Can't get away from the deadly commonplace, Miss Allison, with Sonny on the job. Poor little kid—he's about fed up on untrammeled nature. I'm afraid I owe him a big debt for what I've done to him—and yet—I am trying to pay a bigger one which someone else owes him. Let's camp."

They dropped the reins and turned the horses

loose to graze, and Fair built a little fire of dry wood which sent up a straight column of smoke like a signal.

Nance untied her bundle from the saddle thongs and Fair unrolled a dozen trout, firm and cool in their sheath of leaves. He hung them deftly to the flames on a bent green twig and Romance danced attendance on the hour. He was expert from long experience of cooking in the open, and when he finally announced them done they would have delighted an epicure. Nance laid out a clean white cloth and spread upon it such plain and wholesome things as cold corned beef, white bread and golden butter, home-made cucumber pickles and sugared cookies.

They were poor folk all, the nomad man and boy, the girl who knew so little beyond the grind of work, but they were richer than Solomon in all his glory, for they had health and youth and that most priceless thing of all—a clear conscience and the eager expectation of the good the next day holds.

They sat cross-legged about their sylvan board and forgot such things as work and hardship and the bitterness of threatened feud, and —mayhap—vengeance.

They talked of many things and all the time Nance's wonder grew at Fair's wide knowledge of the outside world, at his gentle manners, his

quiet reticence in some ways, his genial freedom in others.

He told her of the cities and the sea, spoke of Mexico and this and that far place, but mostly he brought her pictures of her own land—the rivers of the Rockies, the Arizona mesas—and the girl, starved for the unknown, listened open-lipped.

They cleared away the cloth and Nance took Sonny in her lap, while Fair stretched out at length smoking in contentment.

The child slept, the sun dropped down the cloud-flecked vault, and it was Fair himself who finally put an end to the enchanted hour, rising and catching up the horses.

"You have far to go, Miss Allison," he said as he stood beside her smiling down into her face, "and Sonny and I must be careful not to work a hardship on you, or you might not come again."

The ride back down Little Blue was quiet. A thousand impressions were moiling happily in Nance's mind. Her eyes felt drowsy, a little smile kept pulling at her lips' corners, and yet, so wholly inexperienced was she, she did not know what magic had been at work in the green silence of the Circle and Grey Spring.

It was only when Fair pulled his horse so sharply up that Buckskin nearly stumbled on his

heels that she came out of her abstraction. He sat rigid in his saddle, one hand extended in warning, gazing straight ahead to where Little Blue opened into Blue Stone. She looked ahead and understood.

A horseman was just coming into sight at the right edge of the opening, a big red steer was just vanishing at the left—and the man was Kate Cathrew's rider, Sud Provine.

He rode straight across and did not glance up the cut, and the watchers in the shadow knew they were unobserved.

For a long time they sat in tense silence after he had passed, waiting, listening, but nothing followed and presently Fair turned and looked at her.

His lips were tightly set and his face was grave.

"Miss Allison," he said regretfully, "that's the first human I've seen in Blue Stone Cañon beside yourself, and it means something to me. It means that Sonny and I must move—at once."

He sat thinking a moment, then raised his eyes to hers again.

"I believe—if you will trust us a little longer—and if you can keep him hidden—that I will take you up. I'll give you Sonny for a while. I feel guilty in doing so, for I know how heavily

burdened you are already, but some day I shall make it right with you—as handsomely right as possible. Will he be too much trouble?"

"Trouble?" cried Nance, her face radiant, "give him to me this minute!" and she held out her arms.

Brand turned and looked down at the boy, smiling again.

"How about that, kid?" he asked. "Cookies and Miss Allison's lap instead of the cold cañon and lonesomeness — why — why, old-timer — what's the matter?"

He pulled the child around a bit to scan him more closely.

The little face was milk-white, the brown eyes wide.

"You—going to—to give me away, Brand?" said Sonny with that curious seeming of maturity which sometimes fell upon him.

The man's face grew very tender.

"I should say not!" he said reassuringly, "I'm only going to let you stay awhile with Miss Allison—so our enemies won't find you when I'm gone."

Nance leaned forward.

"Enemies?" she said sharply. "Enemies, you say?"

"A figure of speech," smiled Fair, "but just the same we don't want any one beside yourself to know about us. And by the way, my

name is Smith at Cordova—and Sonny doesn't exist."

"I see," said the girl slowly, "or rather I don't see—but as I said before, it doesn't matter."

"You're a wonderful woman. Not one in a million would accept us as you have done—lost waifs, ragged, hiding, mysterious. I didn't think your kind lived. You're old-fashioned—blessedly old-fashioned. Why did you accept us?"

"My Mammy says there's something in a woman's heart that sets the stamp on a man for good or bad, a seventh sense. I know there is. A woman *feels* to trust—or not to trust."

Fair nodded.

"That's it," he said, "instinct—but maybe, some day, you may come to feel it has betrayed you—in our case—my case—I mean. What then?"

Nance shook her head.

"It won't, Mr. Fair," she replied.

The man sighed and frowned.

"God knows," he said, "I hope not. But let's get on—it's getting pretty late."

Fair rode to the cave by the pool in silence. There he dismounted and brought from the blankets such poor bits of garments as belonged to the child, rolled them in a bundle and fastened them on Nance's saddle.

"I'm sorry they are so ragged," he apologized.

"It doesn't matter," said Nance, "Mammy has stuff that can be made over. We'll fix him up."

Fair mounted again and rode with her to the mouth of Blue Stone. There he halted and lifted Sonny to Buckskin's rump.

The little fellow whimpered a bit and clung to his neck, while the man patted his bony little shoulder.

"There—there, kid," he said, "don't you love Miss Allison?"

"Yes," wailed Sonny at last; "but—but—I just *love* you, Brand!"

"I've put in two pretty strenuous years for Sonny's sake," he said softly, "but they've been worth while, Miss Allison."

"The service of love is always worth while," said Nance, "it's the biggest thing in this world."

"And now," said Fair, "if you'll buck up and be a man, Sonny, I'll promise to come right down to the homestead some night soon and see you—if Miss Allison will let me?"

Something surged in the girl's breast like a sunlit tide.

"If you don't, we'll come hunting you," she said.

Then Fair kissed the boy, mounted Diamond

and sat with hands crossed on his pommel while Buckskin carried his double burden across the little flat and through the belly-deep flood of Nameless whispering on its riffle.

On the other side Nance and Sonny turned to wave a hand and went forward into a new life.

At the cabin door Bud stared with open mouth when they rode up, but Mrs. Allison, who had been watching them come along the flat far down, and who had vaguely understood, came forward with uplifted arms.

"I figgered it wouldn't be so long before you brought him home," she said, "a child is what we do need in this here cabin. What a fine little man! An' supper's all hot an' waitin'."

"I knew you'd understand, Mammy," said the girl gratefully, "you've got the seventh sense, all right, and one or two more. No wonder our Pappy loved you all his life."

And so it was that Sonny Fair came into the warmth and comfort of fire and lamp-light, of chairs and tables, and beds with deep shuck-ticks, and to the loving arms of woman-kind, after two years of riding on the big black's rump, of sleeping on the earth beside a campfire and the long lonely days of waiting.

And, faithful as his shadow, Dirk the Collie sat on the stone that formed the doorstep and refused to budge until both Nance and Sonny

convinced him that all was well, and that this was home.

When Nance sat to her gracious hour with the Scriptures that night it seemed a very fitting coincidence that the Book should fall open at the Master's tender words, "Suffer little children to come unto Me, for of such is the kingdom of Heaven."

CHAPTER XI

THE ASHES OF HOPE

It was dark of the moon and Sheriff Price Selwood sat on his horse a little distance from McKane's store at Cordova, his hat pulled over his brows, his hands on his saddle horn.

Inside the lighted store four tables were going.

A bunch of cattle-men from the Upper Country were in and most of the Cathrew men were down from Sky Line.

The nine or ten bona-fide citizens of Cordova were present also, and McKane was in high fettle. The few houses of the town were dark for it was fairly late. All these things the sheriff noted in the quarter hour he sat patiently watching.

When he was satisfied that all the families were represented inside, that the dogs of the place were settled to inaction, and that no one was likely to leave the store for several hours at least, he did a peculiar thing.

He tied his horse to a tree near where it stood and went forward quietly on foot, stopping at the rack where the Cathrew horses stood

in a row. They were good stock. Cattle Kate would have nothing else at Sky Line.

Selwood took plenty of time, patting a shoulder here, stroking a nose there, and finally stepped in between a big brown mare and the rangy grey gelding which Sud Provine always rode. He fondled the animal for a few moments, then ran his hand down the left foreleg and picked up the hoof. It was shod, saddle-horse fashion. He placed the foot between his knees, very much after the manner of a blacksmith, and taking a small coarse file from his coat pocket, proceeded to file a small notch in the shoe.

Then he put the file away, gave the grey a last friendly slap, got his own horse and rode away.

He intended to have a good night's sleep.

Several days later Kate Cathrew came down to Cordova and held a short private conversation with McKane.

"McKane," she said, "who gives you the heaviest trade in this man's country?"

"You do," said McKane promptly, "far and away."

"Do you value it?"

"Does a duck swim?"

"Then give me a moment's attention," said Kate Cathrew, "and keep what I say under your hat."

"I'm like the well that old saw tells of—the stone sinks and is never seen again. Confession in the heart of a friend, you know."

"Thanks. Now listen."

When the woman rode away a half hour later, carrying another of those letters from New York which the trader had come to hate ever since Selwood's suggestion concerning the writer, his eyes had a very strange expression. It was a mixture of several expressions, rather —astonishment, of personal gratification, and a vague, incongruous regret. If he had been a better man that last faint seeming of sorrow might have denoted the loss of an ideal, the death of something fine.

But he looked after Cattle Kate with a fire of passion that was slowly growing with every interview.

Life at the homestead on Nameless took on a new color with the advent of Sonny Fair. Mrs. Allison, an epitome of universal motherhood, looked over the scant, well-mended belongings of the family and laid out such articles as she judged could be spared.

These she began expertly to make over into little garments.

"When did Brand buy you these pants, Sonny?" she inquired, but the child shook his head.

"I don't know," he answered.

"H'm. Must be pretty poor," she opined, but Bud scowled in disapproval.

"Pretty durn stingy, I'd say," he remarked.

"Hold judgment, Bud," counseled Nance, "when a man travels for two years he don't have much time to make money. We're poor, too, but that don't spell anything."

Bud held his tongue, but it was plain he was not convinced.

"What makes him so contrary, I wonder?" said the girl later.

"He's jealous," said Mrs. Allison calmly, "because you champion th' stranger. It's natural."

The field of corn was beautiful.

Its blades were broad and satiny, covering the brown earth from view, and the waving green floor came well up along the horses' legs as Nance rode down the rows on the shackly cultivator.

For three days she had been at it, a labor of love. She had many dreams as she watched the light wimpling on the silky banners, vague, pleasant dreams that had to do with her cancelled debt at the store, with the trip to Bement about the carpet, and with the new blue dress she hoped to get with the surplus.

Bud must have some new things, too, and her Mammy needed shoes the worst way.

All these things the growing field promised her, whispering under the little wind, and she was happy deep in her innocent heart.

She wondered if she dared ask Brand to let her take Sonny on that trip to Bement, then instantly decided she should not.

There might be someone from Nameless in the town, and Brand was particularly insistent on his staying out of sight.

She never ceased to wonder about that.

What could be his reason?

What could there be in the Deep Heart country to whom a little child could make a difference?

But it was none of her business, she sagely concluded, and could wait the light of the future. Maybe Brand would some day tell her all about it.

So she worked and planned for two days more. At their end she drove the cultivator to the stable and stood stretching her tired shoulder muscles while Bud unharnessed the team.

She looked back at the field with smiling eyes.

"Can only get in it about once more," she said, "it's growing so fast."

"Pretty," Bud said, "pretty as you, almost. Do you know you're awfully pretty, Sis?"

"Hush!" she laughed. "You'll make me vain. Pretty is as pretty does, you know."

"Well, the Lord knows you do enough," returned the boy bitterly, "if I was only half a man——"

"Bud!" cried Nance quickly, "you're the most sure-enough he-man I know. You've got the patience and the courage of ten common men. If it hadn't been for your steady backing I'd never be on Nameless now. I'd have quit long back."

"Like the dickens you would!" said Bud, but a grin replaced the shadow of bitterness on his face.

Supper that night was particularly pleasant. There were new potatoes and green peas from the garden down by the river, and a plate of the never failing cookies of which Sonny could not get enough.

"He's hollow to his toes," said Mrs. Allison, "I can't never seem to get him full."

"The little shaver's starved," said Bud.

"Not starved, but he ain't had regular food—not right to grow on. I can see a difference already."

Nance reached over an investigating hand to feel the small shoulder. It bore proudly a brand new shirt made from one of Bud's old ones. To be sure, there was a striking dissimilitude of colors, since part of the fabric had been under a pocket and had not faded, but Sonny wore it with the air of kings and princes.

"Yes, sir," she said judicially, "he *is* gaining, sure as the world!"

It seemed to Nance that night that all was well with the world, very well. There seemed a wider margin of hope than usual, as if success, so long denied them, was hovering like a gigantic bird above the homestead, as if their long labor was about to have its reward. She fell asleep thinking of the whispering field, of the trip to Bement, and—of Brand Fair's quiet, dark eyes, the look of the chin-strap on his brown cheek.

She laid a loving hand on Sonny's little head on the pillow of the improvised crib beyond her own big bed—and the world went swiftly from her consciousness. She slept quickly and deeply, as do all those who work hard in the sun and wind—the blessed boon of labor.

It seemed to her that she had hardly lost consciousness when Old John announced from his rafter perch the coming of another day and she saw the faint light of dawn on the sky outside.

She dressed as usual, looked lovingly at the small face of the little sleeper in the crib, and went out, soft-footed, to start the kitchen fire. That done, she took the pail and went out to the well. She rested the bucket on the curb a moment, lifted the well-board, and stood looking

at the faint aureole of light that was beginning to crown Rainbow Cliff. The cliff itself was black, blue-black as deepest indigo, its foot lost in the shadows that deepened down Mystery Ridge. She could hear the murmuring of Nameless, soft and mysterious in the dawn, feel the little wind that was beginning to stir to greet the coming day. Then, as was her habit, she turned her eyes out across the waving green field of her precious corn.

It muse be earlier than she thought, she reflected, for there was not the shimmer of light which usually met her gaze.

She looked again at the eastern sky.

Why, yes—it was light as usual there.

Once more she looked at the field—then she leaned forward, peering hard, her hands still lying on the bucket's rim. Her brows drew down together as she strained her sharp sight to focus on what she saw—or what she thought she saw. For a long time she stood so. Then, as realization struck home to her consciousness, the hands on the bucket gripped down until the knuckles shone white under the tanned skin. Her lips fell open loosely. The breath stopped for a moment in her lungs and she felt as if she were drowning. An odd dizziness attacked her brain, so that the dim world of shadow and light wavered grotesquely. Her

knees seemed buckling beneath her and for the first time in her life she felt as if she might faint. . . . Her Mammy had fainted once—when they brought John Allison home. . . . But she gathered herself with a supreme effort, closed her lips, wet them with her tongue, straightened her shoulders and, taking her hands from their grip on the pail, walked out toward the field.

At the gate she stopped and gazed dully at the ruin before her.

Where yesterday had been a vigorous, lusty, dark green growth, fair to her sight as the edges of Paradise, there was now the bald, piteous unsightliness of destruction.

Of all the great field there was scarcely a dozen stalks left standing. It was a sodden mass of trambled pulp, cut and slashed and beaten into the loose earth by hundreds of milling hoofs.

Far across at the upper end she could dimly see in the growing light a huge gap in the fence —two, three posts were entirely gone. It had taken many head of cattle, driven in and harried, to work that havoc. It was complete.

For a long, long time Nance Allison stood and looked at it. Then with a sigh that seemed the embodiment of all weariness, she turned away and went slowly back to the cabin.

At the open door she met Bud and pushed him back with both hands. Her mother was at the stove, lifting a lid.

At sight of her daughter's face she held it in mid-air.

"Hold hard, girl," she said quietly, "what's up?"

Nance leaned against the door-jamb. Every fibre of her body longed to crumple down, to let go, to relax in defeat, but she would not have it so.

Instead she looked at these two, so greatly dependent upon her, and faced the issue squarely.

"It's the corn-field," she said with difficulty, "it's gone."

"What?"

"Gone? Gone—how?"

"Gone—destroyed—wiped off the earth—trampled out by cattle," she said dully, "every blade—every stalk—root, stem and branch!"

"My Lord A'mighty!" gasped Mrs. Allison, and the words were not blasphemy.

"Cattle Kate!" cried Bud. "Oh, damn her soul to hell!"

"Oh, Bud—don't, don't!" said Nance, her lips beginning to quiver, "'He who—who is guilty of damn—and damnation—shall be in danger—danger of hell fire.'"

But the boy's blue eyes were blazing and he

did not even hear her. He jerked his sagging shoulder up, for a moment, in line with its mate and shut his hands into straining fists.

"Gimme a gun——" he rasped, "Pappy's gun——"

But the mother spoke.

"No guns, Bud—I've seen feud—in Missouri. There's land an' sunlight in other places beside Nameless. With life we can——"

The boy shook his head with a slow, savage motion.

"Not for us," he said, "I'd die first."

Nance straightened by the door. She lifted her head and looked at his grim young face. Some of its grimness came subtly into her own.

"Right," she said, "so would I. We belong to Nameless River—where our Pappy left us—and here we'll stay. Only—I pray God to keep me from—from——" she wet her lips again, "from what is stirring inside me."

"He will," said Bud. "But I'm not so particular. We own this land—and we'll fight for our own."

"Amen," said Nance, "we will. We've still got the hogs to sell. Mammy—let's have breakfast. I'm going down to Cordova—it's right McKane should know."

CHAPTER XII

"GET—OUT—OF—THAT—DOOR!"

That was a bitter ride to Nance.

The day was sweet with the scents and sounds of summer. Birds called from the thickets, high up the pine tops, stirred by a little wind, sang their everlasting diapason, while she could hear far back the voice of Nameless, growing fainter as she left it.

At another time she would have missed nothing of all this, would have gloried in it, drunk with the wine of nature. Now a shadow hung over all the fair expanse of slope and mountain range, an oppression heavy, almost, as the hand of death sat on her heart.

She rode slowly, letting Buckskin take his own time and way, her hands folded listlessly on her pommel, her faded brown riding skirt swinging at her ankles. She had discarded her disfiguring bonnet for a wide felt hat of Bud's and her bright hair shone under it like dull gold. She was scarcely thinking. She had given way to feeling—to feeling the acid of defeat eating at her vitals, the hand of an intangible force pressing upon her.

And she had to face McKane and tell him she

could not pay her debt. That seemed the worst of all. She could go without their necessities—her Mammy's shoes and Bud's new underwear—and as for the luxuries she had planned, like the blue dress and the carpet—why, she would cease thinking about them at once, though the giving up of the carpet did come hard, she frankly owned to that. But to fail in her promise to pay—ah, that was gall to her spirit! However, it couldn't *kill* them, she reasoned, no matter how bitter might be their humiliation. There was always another day, another year, for work and hope, and there were still the hogs. They would bring, at least, enough for the winter's food supply of flour and sugar, salt and tea.

She could not turn them in on the debt—the trader must see that.

Cordova lay sleeping under a late noon-day sun when she rode into the end of the struggling street. A few horses were tied to the hitch rack in front of the store and a half-dozen men lounged on the porch. Nance went hot and cold at sight of them.

She had hoped all the way down that McKane would be alone, for no conversation inside the store could fail to be audible on the porch. It would be hard enough to talk to him without an interested audience.

She felt terribly alien, as if these people were

allied against her, and yet she could not discern among the loungers anyone from Sky Line.

As she drew near she did see with a grateful thrill that Sheriff Price Selwood sat tilted back against the door-jamb, his feet on the rung of his chair. At sight of him a bit of the distress left her, a faint confidence took its place. She remembered his kindly eyes that could harden and narrow so quickly, his way of understanding things and people.

She dismounted and tied Buckskin under a tree and went forward. As she mounted the steps the sheriff looked up, rose and raised his hat.

Nance smiled at him more gratefully than she knew.

Then she stepped inside the door—and came face to face with Kate Cathrew who was just coming out. McKane was behind her carrying a small sack which held her mail and some few purchases.

The two women stopped instantly, their eyes upon each other.

It was the first time they had met thus pointedly.

At sight of this woman whose unproved, hidden workings had meant so much to her, Nance Allison's face went slowly white.

She stood still in the door, straight and quiet, and looked at her in silence.

At the prolonged intensity of her scrutiny Cattle Kate flung up her head and smiled, a conscious, insolent action.

"If you don't want all the door, young woman," she said, "please."

She made a move to pass, but Nance suddenly put out a hand.

There was an abrupt dignity in the motion, a sort of last-stand authority.

"I do," said the girl, "want it all. I have something to tell McKane, and you may as well hear it."

The imperious face of Kate Cathrew flushed darkly with the rising tide of her temper.

"Get—out—of—that—door," she said distinctly, but for once she was not obeyed.

The big girl standing on the threshold looked over her head at the trader. There was a little white line pinched in at the base of Nance's nostrils, her blue eyes were colder and narrower than any one had ever seen them in her life.

"McKane," she said clearly, so that the hushed listeners behind her caught every syllable, "you know what a fight I've made to hold my own on Nameless since my father died—or was killed. You know how close to the wind I've sailed to eat, for you've sold me what we've had. And I've always managed to keep even, haven't I?"

"Yes," said the trader uneasily.

"Up till six months ago when I had to go in debt for a new harness or do no work in my fields this spring, I told you when I bought it, didn't I, why I had to buy it?"

"Yes," he said again.

"It was because someone went into my barn one night and cut the old harness into ribbons. That put me in debt to you for the first time."

She stopped and wet her lips. There was the sound of someone rising on the porch and Price Selwood moved in behind her.

She felt him there and a thrill went through her, as if he had put a hand on her shoulder.

"I told you when I bought it that I'd pay you when my corn was ripe—that, if it went well, I'd have far and away more than enough. Well, it went well—so well that I knew yesterday I'd come out ahead and be able to meet that debt and live beside. This morning that field of corn was gone—trampled out—cut to pieces like my harness—pounded into the dirt by a band of cattle that had been driven—driven, you understand—over every foot of it. There was a wide gap cut in the fence at the upper end. That's all—but I can't pay my debt to you."

She stopped and a sharp silence fell. Outside the store in the shade the stallion Bluefire screamed and stamped.

Kate Cathrew took a quick step forward.

"What for did you tell this drivel before me?" she said. "What's it to me?"

"Nothing, I know," said Nance; "maybe a laugh—maybe a hope. My big flats on the river'd feed a pretty bunch of cattle through. And Homesteaders have been driven out of the cattle country before now."

"You hussy!" cried Cattle Kate, and, bending back she flung up the hand which held the braided quirt. The lash snapped viciously, but Nance Allison was quicker than the whip. Her own arm flashed up and she caught the descending wrist in the grip of a hand which had held a plow all spring.

Like a lever her arm came down and forced Kate's hand straight down to her knee, so that the flaming black eyes were within a few inches of her face.

"Woman," said Nance clearly, "I'm living up to my lights the best I can. I'm holding myself hard to walk in the straight road. The hand of God is before my face and you can't hurt me—not lastingly. Now you—get—out—of—that—door."

And turning she moved Selwood with her as she swung the other, whirling like a Dervish, clear to the middle of the porch.

Kate Cathrew's face was livid, terrible to look upon.

She ran the short distance to the end of the

platform, leaped off and darted to her horse, her hands clawing at the rifle which hung on her saddle.

Selwood pushed Nance inside the store and flung the door shut.

"That woman's a maniac for the moment," he said, "you're best in there."

When Kate came running back with the gun in her hands he faced her before the closed door, his hands in his pockets.

If any of the tense watchers had had a doubt of Price Selwood's courage they lost it then, for he took his life in his hands.

"Kate," he said quietly, "put up that gun. This isn't outlaw country. If you make a blunder you'll hang just like any other murderer —even if you are Kate Cathrew."

For a moment the woman looked at him as a trapped wild-cat might have done, her lips loose and shaking, her eyes mad with rage.

Then she struck the rifle, butt down, on the hard earth and with a full-mouthed oath, flung around the corner, tore the stallion's reins from the ring in the wall and mounted with a whirl.

She struck Bluefire once and was gone down the road in a streak of dust.

Selwood opened the door.

"A narrow shave," he said gravely, "if that had happened anywhere but here you'd be a dead woman, Miss Allison."

"Perhaps," said Nance, "she's taken two shots at me already from the hillside—or someone has. Well—I've told you, McKane, as was your right. Now I'll go back to Nameless."

She turned away, but the trader cleared his throat.

"Ah—about the money for the harness," he said apologetically, "I—that is—I've got to collect it. Times ain't——"

Price Selwood swung around and shot a look at him.

"Eh?" he said. "Got to collect——? Ah, yes, I see—at Cattle Kate's request! You are a fool, McKane. Here, Miss Allison—I'm the sheriff of this county. Wouldn't you rather owe me that money than owe it to McKane? *I* can wait till you raise another crop—I'm not so pushed as our friend here. What do you say?"

Nance raised her eyes to his and they were suddenly soft and blue again. The tight line let go about her upper lip and a stiff smile came instead.

"You knew my Pappy—and I have not forgot how kind you were after—after——. Yes, Mr. Selwood, I'd rather owe you, a whole lot rather, and I'll work doubly hard to pay you back."

Selwood drew some bills from his pocket.

"How much, McKane?" he asked.

The trader sullenly named the amount and received it on the spot.

"Now if you'd just as soon," said the sheriff, "I'll ride out to Nameless with you. I'd like to take a look at that trampled field."

As they left the town and rode out into the trail that led to Nameless, Nance took off her hat and drew a long, deep breath.

Selwood laughed.

"Do you feel like that?" he asked.

"Exactly," said she, "like a weight was off my shoulders. That debt to McKane was a bitter load."

"The trader is getting into deep water" said the sheriff. "I hate to see him do it."

"How—deep water?"

"He's falling more and more into Cattle Kate's power—and all for nothing. He knows it, but seems helpless. I've seen the like before. She's a bad woman to tie to."

"She's handsome—that's one thing sure."

"Yes. Her type is always handsome. But I'm surprised to hear you say so."

"Why?" asked the girl wonderingly.

"Because most women hate to admit beauty in another, and of all people on Nameless you have the least reason to see anything attractive in her."

Nance sighed again, thinking of her lost corn field and of her present appalling poverty.

"As near as I'll let myself come to hate,"

she said, "I do hate her. I've got to fight it mighty hard. You know how hard it is to fight that way—inside your own soul."

"Hardest battle-ground we ever stand on," said Selwood with conviction. "I've had some skirmishes there myself—and I can't say I always came off victor."

"You can't, sometimes, without a lot of prayer," returned Nance soberly, "I've pretty near worn out my knees on the job."

Selwood wanted to laugh at her naïve earnestness, but caught himself in time.

They rode for a time in silence, Nance and Buckskin ahead, the sheriff following on his lean bay horse.

Presently Nance turned with a hand on her pony's rump and looked at him speculatively.

"You sort of lay up something to Cattle Kate about this rustling, don't you?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I've watched her for months, but can't get anything on her—not anything tangible."

"I was in Little Blue Cañon the other day," said Nance, "and saw Sud Provine pass its mouth in Blue Stone driving a red steer north. I've wondered a lot where he could have been taking it."

"North in Blue Stone? That's odd. There isn't enough feed in that cañon to graze a calf two days."

"And what's at its head?" asked Nance, "I've never been clear up."

"Blue Stone heads high in the Deep Heart hills," said the sheriff, "but about eight miles up from its mouth on Nameless its right wall falls abruptly away for a distance of a couple of miles and there one can go out on the open plain that stretches over toward the Sawtooth Range and leads out to Marston and the railroad. There's some bunch grass there, but mighty little water. Nothing but the stream in the cañon itself to come back to. And cattle driven so far away from the home range would be a poor risk, it seems to me, for Sky Line."

"Well—I wondered about it. Thought I'd tell you any way."

"I'm glad you did. I shall remember it."

At the homestead Nance led Selwood to the corn field's lower gate and left him.

"Go over it if you want," she said, "and I'll be out in a minute or so."

At the cabin she told Sonny to go into her room and stay until she came for him.

"I feel guilty," she thought, "for I can trust the sheriff, but Brand asked me to keep him hidden. I've got to be true to my promise."

"You ask the sheriff to supper," said Mrs. Allison, "I'll kill a fryer an' make some biscuits."

When Nance went out she found Selwood examining the trampled field minutely.

"Must have had fifty head or more," he said, "and five or six riders. Sud Provine was one of them."

"Yes? How can you tell?"

"I know his horse's tracks," grinned the sheriff, "it's that big grey gelding."

CHAPTER XIII

"WE'RE OUR PAPPY'S OWN—AND WE BELONG ON NAMELESS."

That night at dusk as Nance sat in the open door with Sonny drowsing in her lap, Dirk shot out across the yard like a tawny streak and headed away toward the river.

He made no outcry, but went straight as a dart, and presently there came the little crack of shod hoofs on the stones of Nameless' lip, and a rider came up out of the farther shadows with the Collie leaping in ecstasy against his stirrup.

Something tightened in Nance's throat, a thrill shot through her from head to foot. That strange surge of warmth and light seemed to flood her whole being again.

"Mammy—Bud—" she said softly, "I think Brand Fair is coming."

Bud stirred in the darkened room, but Mrs. Allison was silent.

"Always, soon or late," she thought to herself, "a man comes ridin' out th' night—an' a woman is waitin'. It's comin' late to her—she'll be twenty-two come June—but it's comin'. An' she don't know it yet."

"Good evening," said a deep voice pleasantly as the dark horse stopped in the dooryard, "is a stranger welcome?"

"We've been listening for you every night," said the girl simply, "it's been a long time."

"Brand!" cried the child sharply, struggling frantically to find his feet, "Oh! Oh!—*Brand!*"

The man dismounted and came forward.

He lifted the boy and kissed him, holding him on his breast, while he held out a hand to Nance.

At its warm clasp the surging glory inside her deepened strangely.

Mrs. Allison rose and lighted the lamp on the table.

"Come in, stranger," she said, "an' set."

Fair came in and Nance presented him to her two relatives.

Mrs. Allison looked deep in his face with her discerning eyes as she gave him her toil-hard hand and nodded unconsciously.

With Bud it was a different matter.

There was a faint coldness in his young face, a sullen disapproval. But Nance saw none of these things. Here eyes were dark with the sudden dilation of the pupils which this man's presence always caused. There was a soft excitement in her.

For a little while they sat in the well-worn, well-scrubbed and polished room which was parlor, dining-room and kitchen, and talked of the warmth of the season, the many deer that were in the hills, and such minor matters, while Sonny clung to the man and devoured his face with adoring eyes.

Then the mother, harking back to the customs of another time, another environment, rose, bade good-night, signaled her son and retired to the inner regions.

Bud spoke with studied coldness and shambled after her.

Nance regarded this unusual proceeding with some astonishment. She did not realize that this was the peak of proper politeness in the backwoods of her Mammy's day—that a girl must have her chance and a clear field when a man came "settin' up" to her.

And so it was that presently she found herself sitting beside Brand Fair in the doorway, for the man preferred the inconspicuous spot, while Sonny sighed with happiness in his arms and Dirk sat gravely on his plumy tail at his master's knee.

Diamond stood like a statue in the farther shadows.

A little soft wind was drawing up the river, the stars were thick in the night sky, and some-

thing as sweet as fairy music seemed to pulse in the lonely silence.

"Has old-timer been good?" Fair wanted to know jocosely, rubbing the curly head which was no longer tousled.

"Sure I have, Brand," the little fellow ventured eagerly, "awful good—haven't I, Nance?"

"Miss Allison, Sonny," said Brand severely.

"No—Nance. She told me so herself."

"That settles it. No one could go against such authority. But has he been good?"

"Good?" said Nance. "He's brought all the happiness into this house it's seen for many a long day—or is likely to see."

"That's good hearing," returned the man, "and I have done a lot of riding this past week. Tell me, Miss Allison—what sort of a chap is this sheriff of yours?"

"He's the best man on Nameless River!" cried the girl swiftly, "the kindest, the steadiest. I'd trust him with anything."

"Does he talk?"

"Talk?"

"Can he keep a still tongue in his head?"

"I don't know as to that—but I do know he's been a friend to me in my tribulation. He probably saved my life today—and he saved me a lot of trouble."

"Saved your life?" queried Fair sharply, "How's that?"

"I swung Cattle Kate Cathrew out of McKane's store and she was going to shoot me but the sheriff faced her. I told her some things she didn't like."

Fair drew a long breath.

"What was the occasion?" he asked.

"My field of corn," said Nance miserably, her trouble flooding back upon her, "last night it was rich with promise—what I was building on for my debt and my winter's furnishing. This morning it was nothing but a dirty mass of pulp—trampled out by cattle—and we know that a Sky Line rider was behind those cattle. It's some more of the same work that's been going on with us since before our Pappy died. It's old stuff—what the cattle kings have done to the homesteaders for many years in this country.

"If we weren't our Pappy's own—Bud and I—we'd have been run out long ago. I would, I think, when Bud got hurt, if it hadn't been for him. He's a fighter and won't let go. The land is ours, right and fair, and he says no bunch of cut-throats is going to take it from us. I say so, too," she finished doggedly.

Fair reached out a hand and for a moment laid it over hers, clasped on her folded arm.

"Miss Allison," he said admiringly, "you're a wonderful woman! Not many men would stick in the face of such colossal misfortunes. You must love your land."

"I do," she said, "but it's something more than that. It's a proving, sort of—a battle line, you know, and Bud and I, we're soldiers. We hope we can not run."

"By George!" said the man, "you can't—you won't. Your kind don't. But it's a grim battle, I can see that."

"It's so grim," said Nance quietly, "that we couldn't survive this winter if it wasn't for the hogs that will be ready to market this fall. McKane wouldn't give me time on my debt—Cattle Kate won't let him. So the sheriff paid it—he says he can wait till next year for his money—he's not so hard pushed as the trader—and *he's* rich, they say."

For a little while they sat in silence while Sonny, blissfully happy, fell fast asleep in Fair's arms.

Then the man stirred and spoke.

"Miss Allison," he said, "the time has come when I am going to tell you something—just a little bit that may give you comfort in this hard going of yours. I want you to know that more than one force is at work against this woman at Sky Line Ranch—against her and all those with her. Sheriff Selwood is not the only one who suspects her of dark doings—and the other—knows. I am that other."

Nance gasped in the shadows. The flickering lamp, blowing in the wind, had gone low.

"You?"

"Yes. That's why I have been so much a mystery in this country—why I have kept Sonny hidden in the cañon—why I have spent two years of my life riding the back places of the West. I knew she was somewhere—and I knew she was crooked. The men she has with her are not cattle men—they are criminals, every one."

"Good gracious!" whispered the girl again.

"And the reason I am not ready to run into her yet is this—she would recognise me before I am ready, because she knew me once some six years ago."

Nance Allison was, as her Mammy would say, "flabbergasted."

She was too astonished to speak.

"I know a lot from the other end of her operations. I want to make sure at this end. I want to get in touch with Sheriff Selwood—and I want you to hold hard on your battle line, knowing that it can not always be as it is now, that other forces are lined up with you—that if all goes as it should—Cattle Kate will be caught in her own trap—and I hope to the Lord it is soon."

"Why—why, this is a wonder to me!" said Nance, "a wonder and a light in my darkness! I *felt* you for good that first day I set eyes on you in the cañon. Now I understand—you are the messenger whose feet are beautiful on the

hills, as the Bible says—who bears good tidings! My faith has never faltered," she went on earnestly, "I knew always that the hand of God was before me, that my ways were not hidden from His sight and that some way, some time, all would be well with us. But sometimes it has been hard."

Fair sat thinking deeply.

"Yes—Cattle Kate would make it hard—if she had a reason," he said and there was a note of bitterness in his low voice, "only God and I know how hard."

"Has she——" Nance asked and hesitated, "has she made it hard for—for you?"

Somehow she dreaded his reply.

It was long in coming, and then it was cryptic.

"Vicariously. For one other she made it hard to the last bitter dregs—to that unfashionable but sometimes existent thing, a broken heart, and at last to death itself. To death in black disgrace."

Nance caught her breath in dismayed sympathy.

"She is cold as stone," went on the man, "brilliant, strong, and ruthless. She sets herself a point and cleaves straight to it regardless of who or what she tramples on the way."

"Yes—like wanting our land. She means to get it one way or another."

"Exactly. That rope you told me of was a

bold stroke for it. Your father was gone—your brother was the only other male of your family. With him gone, too, you should have been easy."

"It was murder she meant," said Nance, "no less. We've always known that."

"And what about your father's death? Tell me about that—if it is not too painful."

"We don't know much about it. Our Pappy was a mountaineer—born in the Kentucky hills, lived in Missouri, a man who loved the outdoors. He was a hunter and a woodsman. He was careful, never took chances. That's why we've never been reconciled to the accident that killed him—he was found at the foot of Rainbow Cliff, as if he'd fallen down it. And no one in this country has ever been known to reach the top of that spine."

"Have you ever thought that perhaps he didn't fall. That he might have been put there as a way to cover a—crime?"

Nance shook her head.

"Every bone in his body was broken," she said sadly, "he was as loose as a bag of sand. He fell down Rainbow Cliff all right—but how it happened, that's what we'd love to know."

"And probably never will," said Fair.

"No."

They sat for a time in silence.

The little wind blew in their faces, sweet with its fresh and nameless suggestion of flowing

water. Out in the shadows the big black horse stood perfectly still, his peaceful breath scarce lifting his sides. The Collie was silent, though his handsome head was up, his sharp ears lifted above his ruff. The child in Fair's lap continued to sleep.

It seemed to Nance Allison that the night had never been so calm before, the stars so bright, the unspeakable majesty of the heavens so apparent. She wondered how it was possible to feel so safe and at peace in the face of this last disaster, to look to the future once more with hope.

The little smile was pulling at her lips again, her long blue eyes were soft with hidden light.

And then, out of the stillness and starlight, from somewhere across the river, there came the clear crack of a high-power gun, the thud of a ball in wood. With one sweep of his right arm Fair flung Nance back upon the floor, himself and the child beside her.

He slipped Sonny from his lap with a low word and rolled clear. Quick as a cat he drew his body to the table, raised an arm above its edge and swept the lamp to the floor, extinguishing it instantly.

Then he crawled back and the hands he laid upon the girl's shoulders were shaking.

"Tell me," he gritted, "tell me it did not hit you!"

"I—can't," whispered Nance, "my left arm —it feels all full of needles."

Fair slipped his fingers down along the firm young arm, beneath its faded sleeve and found it warm and wet.

Sonny was awake but still as a little quail hid in the grass at its mother's warning whistle.

There was the sound of a soft opening door beyond, and Mrs. Allison's voice, low and terror-filled, said, "Nance—girl——"

"Don't fret, Mammy," she whispered back, "I'm all right—just a scratch. Pin something on the window before you make a light."

Bud's shuffle came round the table and he knelt beside her, feeling for her hands.

"Mammy!" he cried with restrained passion, "I'll have my Pappy's gun now—or go with bare hands! You got to gimme it!"

Nance got to her feet with Fair's arm about her and pushed the door shut. Then the mother struck a light and restored the lamp to the table. In its yellow flare they peeled the sleeve from the girl's arm and found a shallow wound straight across, about three inches above the elbow.

For a long time Brand Fair looked at it.

Then he raised sombre eyes to her face.

"Eight inches to the right," he said slowly, "and it would have been your heart."

She nodded.

"Cattle Kate means business now," she said, "but—I—don't think she'll get me."

"Not if I can get her first," said Fair grimly. "Now let's have some hot water strong with salt."

Mrs. Allison set about preparing this, while the bitter tears of one who had seen feud before, dripped down her weathered cheeks.

The boy Bud stood by the table opening and closing his hands and muttering under his quick breath—"Pappy's gun—it's good and true-sighted. Not high-power—but I can hide and wait—close—close——"

"If you'll forgive a stranger, Mrs. Allison," put in Fair, straightening up and looking at the mother, "I'd say—give him his father's gun. And I'd say, Buddy—don't go to pieces now after such a brave and conservative fight. Be a defender—not a murderer."

The boy turned his dilated eyes to him, wetting his dry lips.

In the long look that passed between them something seemed to break down in Bud, the antagonism he had felt for Fair seemed to melt away. The mysterious comradery of honest manhood fell upon them both, and the man held out his hand.

The boy took it and his eyes became sane.

"We've got a big job cut out for us," said Fair gravely, "and must be in the right—at every point. We'll dig out the nest of vipers at Sky Line, but we'll do the job cleanly. Now let's get busy with our first-aid."

CHAPTER XIV

LIGHT ON THE SHERIFF'S SHADOWS

From that night forth Fair came frequently to the homestead on Nameless. It was a dull spot now and his advent was a saving grace. The light of hope, the joy of labor and accomplishment, had in a measure departed. There was little or nothing to do, less to look forward to. For a little while Nance kept to the cabin as a matter of precaution, but soon she began to pick up the odds and ends of her pointless work—to mend the fence which had been cut, and to make ready to harvest the crop of hay across the river.

"Though I suppose it will be just that much work thrown away," she said, "for the stacks will burn some night like they did before."

"Take a chance," counseled Fair, "maybe they won't this time."

"You bet we'll take the chance," said the girl with a flare of her old spirit, "we've never laid down yet."

But try as she would there was a dullness in her, a desire to stop and rest a bit, and the hatred that was slowly growing in her stirred

anew each time she raised her eyes to the distant line of Rainbow Cliff gleaming in the light like fairy stuff.

"If it wasn't for you now, Mr. Fair," she said to him, "I think I'd—almost—be ready to give up. You give me new courage—as Sheriff Selwood did when he stepped behind me that day on McKane's porch."

"No, you wouldn't. It isn't in you to give up. Perhaps reinforcements do have their effect—but you'd never leave the line, Nance."

The girl smiled.

It was the first time he had used her given name and her heart missed a beat, while the warm surge went through her again.

"No—I know it—but sometimes I do feel—well, tired."

"You've had enough to make you so," he said and laid his hand on hers. At his infrequent touches Nance always felt a glow of returning strength, as if once more she could work and fight for her own. She counted it one of her scant blessings that Brand Fair had come into her life at its darkest hour.

Sheriff Selwood had a visitor.

The prospector, John Smith, rode into his ranch yard and sat judging him with shrewd eyes.

"Sheriff," he said, "I've a notion you and I

could have a pleasant and perhaps a profitable talk. Will you saddle a horse and ride out with me a way?"

"Sure," said Price Selwood readily, and asked no questions.

He went into his stable and soon came out leading the lean bay, mounted and followed as the other turned away.

"That's a pretty good horse you ride, stranger," he said, "I've noticed it at Cordova a time or two."

"Yes," returned Smith, "he has blood and bottom—also intelligence."

They rode for a while in silence. Then the stranger slouched sidewise in his saddle and looked at Selwood.

"I'm going to tell you several things, Sheriff," he said, "and show you some more. And I want to make a pact with you. It's about Cattle Kate Cathrew and the Allison family."

"Shoot," said the sheriff succinctly.

"I'm a stranger hereabouts, but I'm not a happen-so. I've hunted Kate Cathrew for two years."

At that Price Selwood became alert in every nerve.

"What?" he ejaculated.

"On horseback, by train—from New York to this side the Rockies. Are you willing to let me line up with you in this matter?"

"I'm willing to do anything under Heaven that's square to get that bunch of rustlers—for so I'm convinced they are," said Selwood, "and to do it quick, for I'm afraid if we don't, something will happen to the folks on Nameless that can't be mended."

"So am I. Miss Allison was shot in her doorway a few nights back."

"God!" cried the sheriff, "what's that?"

"Just a scratch on her arm—but it was meant for her heart. I was there at the time. The ball came from across the river—a high-power gun."

The sheriff groaned.

"That's it! The same old stuff—shoot from ambush—no evidence—nothing. It makes a man wild! I've done all a man could do, and I can't put my finger on a thing."

"I've heard about the disappearing cattle," said the other, "and I've done a bit on my own hook. I may as well tell you now, that my name is not Smith, and that I've been in Blue Stone Cañon for nearly two months."

Selwood looked at him in astonishment.

"No one knows it all, even about his own doorstep," he said. "I thought you were just passing through."

"If you will, I'd like you to ride up the cañon with me," said Fair, "to where the right wall falls away beyond the mouth of Little Blue. It's early and we can make it by noon, I think."

They fell silent for a while, threading the hills that rose in a jumbled mass to the south of Nameless Valley, and after an hour or so, reached the river. They crossed on the riffle where Nance was accustomed to ford on her way to Blue Stone, and entered the mouth of the great cut.

"We'll keep to the water as much as possible," said Fair, "because there are other eyes than ours here sometimes."

They passed the empty cave where Nance had found Sonny and Dirk and followed the stream on up to the mouth of Little Blue.

"From up in there," said Fair, riding ahead, "I saw one of the Cathrew riders—a man named Provine—driving a red steer up this way."

"Ah!" said the sheriff, adding to himself—"and so did Nance Allison. These young folks seem to know each other pretty well."

"He went on north and disappeared. I followed next day and came upon a mystery—some more of this water travel which leads nowhere."

"We've had a lot of that," said Selwood bitterly, "it's what has baffled the whole country."

"Well—I'll show you something," said Fair, "that may set you guessing."

The keen blue shadows were cold and the voices were murmuring in the high escarpments.

Through pools and over shale, where ever they

could, they put their horses, avoiding the sand, and presently, when the sunlight had crept almost down to the floor of the cañon, they came out at the spot where the right wall fell away abruptly showing the plains stretched out like a dry brown floor, dotted with sparse bunch grass.

On the left the great precipice continued unbroken.

Fair went on ahead, still keeping to the water, though both horses were pretty well winded with the hard going it afforded, and at last drew up to let Selwood come alongside.

He sat still for a moment.

"Listen a bit," he said, "do you hear anything different from the sounds of water and the murmuring of the big cut?"

The sheriff listened sharply.

"Yes," he said presently, "I do. Sounds like wind."

"Exactly. Yet there isn't any wind, more than the draft which always draws down the cañon. Now look closely at the wall. Watch that clump of willows yonder."

He pointed ahead and to the left where a dense green growth stood alone against the rock face.

Selwood looked and for a moment his face did not change.

Then, suddenly, his mouth fell open, his eyes grew wide with astonishment.

"Great Scott!" he said, "*they're blowing out from the wall!* There's wind behind them!"

Fair moved forward and dismounted, leaving Diamond in the stream. The sheriff followed.

They stepped lightly across the strip of sand which lay between the water and the willows and Fair turned to the right, circling the clump.

"Here," he said, "that red steer and the man who drove it went into the wall. I found their tracks that day. They've been obliterated by the shifting sand since then."

He pushed aside a feathery branch and the sheriff at his shoulder craned an incredulous head to look into what seemed the mouth of a cave.

"No—it's not a cave," said Fair at his surmise, "it's a prehistoric underground passage. It leads straight into the heart of Mystery Ridge from this end, and it has an opening somewhere, attested to by this current of wind. This mouth is just wide enough to admit one steer at a time, one horse and rider—but—what more do you want?"

"Great Scott!" cried Selwood again, "of all the impossible things! And not a soul on Nameless knows about it!"

"Wrong!" said Fair, "Kate Cathrew and her

riders know. That open plain yonder—it leads out to a town, doesn't it? On the railroad?''

''Marston—yes. A long way across.''

''Water?'' queried Fair.

''Yes—at intervals. Springs. Do for driving—yes—not for range—too far apart.''

''Exactly,'' said Fair. ''Now, sheriff, find the other end of this subterranean passage and I believe you'll have solved the mystery of the disappearing steers.''

Price Selwood held out his hand. It was trembling.

''I can't tell you what I owe you for this information, Mr. ——?''

''Smith—yes,'' said Fair smiling.

''Smith. It means more than I can say—to me.''

''It means as much—or more—to me,'' returned the other, ''I've given two years of my life to a still-hunt for Kate Cathrew. I'd give two more to see her brought to justice.''

''And we'll get her!'' said the sheriff grimly though with a lilt of joy in his voice. ''Oh, my Lord, just won't we get her! We'll follow this hole straight to its——''

''If I might suggest,'' cut in Fair, ''I'd say we'll back out now—even brush out our tracks—and begin a systematic picketing of the Cathrew bunch. The cattle are fat on the ranges—it'll soon be time to drive. Don't you think it

likely that another big bunch might—disappear down Nameless River?"

"Say," said Selwood smiling. "Mister, you just move in my house with me! You can think faster and straighter than any man I ever met. Let's go right now."

Fair laughed and turned away, leading Diamond back down the cañon.

"For the present," he said, "I'll keep to the background as I have been doing. This woman would recognise me and be instantly alert for trouble. Another thing, Sheriff—those men with her are not cattlemen."

"Just what I've always said!" cried Selwood delightedly, "I knew that long ago. There's one or two who do pass muster—her foreman and that black devil from Texas, Sud Provine. The rest are city stuff."

"They are, without exception, criminals who have been defended by one of the ablest lawyers in New York and acquitted. They owe him a lot—and he has something more on each one of them, so that they are his henchmen in every instance. This man is Lawrence Arnold."

"Kate Cathrew's partner! He owns half of Sky Line!"

"Exactly. When he gets hold of a man he wants to use, he seems to send him here. I have recognized three of these riders already, though none of them knew me."

"Excuse me, mister," said Selwood, "but how do you happen to know so much?"

"That question is your right, and I will answer it. Kate Cathrew was a New York woman—I knew her there some six years ago. She was clever then—and unscrupulous, always playing for her own advancement. It was along that line that she did the deed for which I have hunted her down—and found her at last. What deed that was I am not ready to say, nor to whom it was done. It must suffice for the present to tell you that it ruined one life and bade fair to ruin another until I stepped in to take a hand. These two lives were very near my own—and for their sake I have become a wanderer, a homeless tramp, searching the lone places of the West to find this woman and make her pay—to bring her to justice. I watched Lawrence Arnold for three years before I started and I knew he was in touch with her, that between them some way they were making money, but I could never get track of her through him. He was too sharp for me. I have visited every cattle ranch owned by a woman in the whole United States, it seems to me. I found seven in Texas, two in Montana, and more in Idaho. I have ridden this little chap thousands of miles, shipped him with me by rail thousands more. I knew it was cattle stuff from some of Arnold's

deals, but where they came from has been a mystery—until two months ago. Now you know what I am and why I'm on Cattle Kate's trail like a nemesis. I think, if we work together, we'll land her soon—and land her hard and fast where she belongs."

"Amen to that," said Selwood fervently.

The summer drowsed along on Nameless, sweet with sun and the little winds that stirred the pine tops, green with verdure and starred with wild flowers. The lonesome world of the jumbled hills was fair as Paradise, wistful with silence, mysterious with its suggestion of eternal waiting.

To Nance Allison, sitting listlessly on her doorstep, it seemed strangely empty. There was nothing to do, now that the heavy labor of the haying was over. She watched her three big stacks with sombre eyes, expecting each morning to find them destroyed, but nothing happened to them.

Bud carried his father's rifle now and day after day he went morosely into the hills after venison.

"Got to hang up enough meat for winter," he told Nance when she looked at him with troubled eyes.

"Got to remember that Commandment which says 'Thou shalt not kill,'" she answered.

"Brand said to carry the gun."

"Brand said 'defend'—not 'murder.' Hold hard, Bud. We've kept clean so far."

"Yes—and what've we got? A grave—and *this*."

He shrugged his sagging shoulder.

Quick tears came in Nance's eyes and she laid a hand upon it with infinite tenderness.

"I know," she said, "but somehow I still have faith. We'll come out free some day."

"Perhaps—free like our Pappy."

"God forbid!" said the girl with trembling lips.

CHAPTER XV

THE FLANGE IN RAINBOW CLIFF

It was getting along into August. In every cup and hollow of the Deep Heart hills the forage was deep and plentiful. Cattle, scattered through the broken country, waxed sleek and fat. They had nothing to do but fill their paunches in the sunlit glades and chew their cuds on the shadowed slopes.

Bossick, riding his range one day, came upon Big Basford and Sud Provine ambling down toward the upper reaches of Nameless.

Their horses were tired, giving evidence of hard going, and the cattleman stopped and looked at them with hostile eyes.

"Pretty far off your stamping ground, ain't you?" he asked.

Provine grinned.

He was a slow-moving individual with a bad black eye and a reputation with the gun that always rode his thigh, though he had been mild enough on Nameless. It was the little wimple of trailing whispers which had come into the

country behind him that had put the brand upon him.

"Are so," he answered insolently, "but hit's free range land at that, ain't it?"

"In theory, yes," said Bossick, "but it's about time practice changed matters. I'm about fed up on theory—and so are a few others in this man's country. I'd take it well if you and all your outfit stayed on the south side of Mystery where you belong. Your stock don't range this far in the Upper Country."

"Is that so," drawled the other, "an' who says so?"

"I do," said Bossick quietly, "and I'm only giving you a warning, Provine, which you'd better heed. You can take the word to Kate Cathrew, too. Her high-handed methods don't set any too well with us—and we don't care who knows it."

"To hell with you and your warnings!" flared Big Basford, his ugly temper rising. "Sky Line's too strong for any damned bunch of backwoods buckaroos, an' don't you forget it! We're——"

"Shut up!" snapped Provine, and rode away.

"Selwood's right," mused Bossick as he looked after them, "they're a precious lot of outthroats."

At Sky Line Ranch there was activity.

Kate Cathrew was gathering beef.

Riders were coming in daily with little bunches of cattle, all in good condition, which they herded into the corrals.

Day and night the air was resonant with the endless bawling.

It was a little early for the drive—but then Cattle Kate was always early. And this year she had a particular reason for precipitancy. One of those New York letters had said, "—— would like to come a little sooner, if possible, so let's clean up promptly."

The word of those letters was law to her. If they had said "ship" in December, she would have tried to do so.

Now she was out on Bluefire from dawn to dark herself, and there was little or nothing escaped her eyes. She knew to a nicety how many yearlings were on the slopes of Mystery, the number of weaning calves, the steers that were ready for shipping and those that were not.

When Provine carried her Bossick's message verbatim the red flush of anger rose in her face again and she struck the stallion a vicious cut with her quirt.

Bluefire rose on his hind legs, pawing, and shook his head in rage, the wild blood struggling with the tame in him.

"If Bossick ever speaks to you again," said Kate, "you tell him to go to hell, and that Kate Cathrew said so."

"I did," said Basford, grinning, "and Sud objected."

"Where's your allegiance to Sky Line?" she asked Provine instantly, "must Basford show you loyalty?"

"I can show him discretion," said Provine, evenly, "an' hit don't take much brains to see that. Do you *want* these ranchers t' begin ridin' hard on us—nights, for instance, an' *now?*"

Kate frowned and tapped her boot.

"The devil his due," she said presently, "you're right, Provine," and turned away.

The corrals were choked with cattle.

Sky Line was ready for its drive.

On the last night before the start there was a peculiar tenseness in everything about the busy place. Kate Cathrew was everywhere. She saw what horses were ready for use, spoke sharply with every rider to make sure he knew what he was to do, and told Rod Stone once more to get out of the kitchen.

The boy laughed, but Minnie Pine glanced after her with smouldering eyes.

"She's a devil—the Boss," she told Josefa, "I hate her."

After the early supper Caldwell, Provine, Bas-

ford and four others, saddled fresh horses and rode away.

It was dark of the moon—as it was always when Sky Line gathered beef—a soft windy dark, ideal for the concealment of riders, the disguising of sounds.

They dropped down the mountain at an angle, heading northwest to circle the end of Mystery, and they followed no trail.

They were all armed and all wore dark clothing.

The only point of light about them was the grey horse which Provine rode.

Kate Cathrew had remonstrated about that horse, but the Texan who feared neither man, beast or devil, had slapped its rump affectionately and refused to ride any other.

"If that damned nosey sheriff hits my trail on his long-legged bay I want old Silvertip under me," he had said, "I don't aim to decorate no records for him."

"Are you saying you won't obey me?" the boss had asked in a voice of ice.

"Yes, ma'am, in this particular instance."

"Do you know Lawrence Arnold will soon be here?"

"Well?"

"You know what he can do to you?"

"Shore. But—I'll risk it—for Silvertip."

So he had deliberately mounted and the woman was thankful that none of the other riders had heard the insubordination.

Provine was invaluable, and she held her peace.

Caldwell, leading, kept well up on the slope above the river and after two hours' hard going they were well around the northwest end of Mystery Ridge which flared like a lady's old-fashioned skirt, and heading down into the glades that broke the jumbled ridges of the Upper Country.

Here Bossick, a rich man, ran his cattle and had his holding.

His ranch lay well back from the river and up, but his stock ranged down. That was why it had been easy prey for the mysterious rustlers of Nameless River.

These men did not talk.

They rode with a purpose and they were alert to every sound, their nerves were taut as fiddle strings.

Where the slanting glades came down toward the river they dropped to the level and presently rode up along a smooth green floor that led directly toward Bossick's place, though a sharp spine cut it off at the head. The outlet from the ranch to the river lay over this ridge and parallel to it.

As they trotted up the glade the little wind

that drew down from the cañon at its head brought the scent of cattle, and presently they came upon a horse and rider standing like a statue in the shadows.

Caldwell drew rein sharply.

"Dickson?" he asked in a low voice.

"O. K." came the answer as the other moved forward to join them.

"Seventy-one head," he said quietly, "and all ready."

"Then let's get busy," said the foreman, "and get out of here."

With pre-arranged and concerted action the seven men divided and circled the herd which was bedded and quiet. On the further edge they were joined by another shadowy rider, and with silence and dispatch they got the cattle up and moving.

They made little noise, drifting down the level floor of the glade in a close-packed bunch. At its mouth they headed south along the shore of the river and followed along the stream for a matter of several miles. Where the western end of Mystery turned, Nameless curved and went down along the ridge's foot in a wide and placid flow. It was here that the drivers forced the cattle to the water and kept them in it, riding in a string along the edge. This was particular work and took finesse and dispatch.

The bewildered stock tried at first to come out,

but everywhere along the shore were met with the crack of the long whips, the resistance of the string of horsemen, so that presently, following the several dominant steers which traveled in the lead, the whole herd splashed and floundered along the sandy bottom of the river, knee deep in water.

This was the trick which had baffled cattle-land, and it was both easy and clever, comparatively.

And so Bossick's seventy-one head of steers were disappearing and there was none to see.

That is, at this stage of the proceedings.

There *was* one to see—one who had spent many weary weeks of night riding, of patient watching which had seemed likely to be unrewarded—Sheriff Price Selwood sitting high on the slope above Kate Cathrew's trail, as he had so often, doggedly following his "hunch" and the prospector John Smith's discovery.

Since that ride up Blue Stone Cañon he had taken turns with Smith in picketing Cattle Kate's outfit, but nothing untoward had taken place.

Now he sat in tedious silence, listening to the night sounds, unaware that any one was out from Sky Line, since Caldwell and his companions had dropped diagonally down the slope in their going, passing far above him.

For an hour he sat, slouching sidewise in his

saddle, his hat pulled over his eyes. The bay horse stood in hip-dropped rest, drowsing comfortably.

It was well after midnight, judging by the stars in the dark sky, when Selwood suddenly held the breath he was drawing into his lungs.

He had heard a cattle-brute bawl.

For a moment he was still as death.

Then he straightened up, every nerve taut.

He heard the sounds of cattle, the crack of whips, the unmistakable commotion of moving bodies. As it all came nearer below him he caught the swish and splash of water, and knew he was at last witnessing a raid of rustlers, one of the mysterious "disappearances" which had puzzled all the Deep Heart country for so long.

He wished fervently that Smith were with him—that Bossick and Jermyn and all the rest were there.

His heart was beating hard and to save his life he could not help the excitement which took hold upon him.

And presently he heard, directly beneath him where Kate Cathrew's trail crossed Nameless, the trample and crack of a myriad hoofs taking to the rocky slope. The riders were turning the steers up toward Sky Line Ranch!

But what could they do with them there?

Where could they hide them?

He had searched every foot of the home place

himself that day for the two of Old Man Conlan, and had found not so much as a sheltered gulch, a hidden pocket.

What, then, could Cattle Kate do with such a bunch as was coming up her trail now?

Sheriff Selwood had food for thought but little time to use it. He had only time for decision, and for the action which was to follow swiftly on that decision.

As the cattle came up the slope, pushed by the many horsemen who completely encircled them, they left a broad trail, their tracks all going upward—all this passed through his racing mind.

What was to prevent him or any one else from riding straight up to their destination by broad daylight?

And then on the heels of this question came like a flash of light on a dark curtain that old *coincidence in time!*

When that ninety head had vanished Kate Cathrew had been driving down—driving *down* from Sky Line—three hundred head, head of her own stock, all open and above board, properly branded clear and fair!

Three hundred head of steers whose moiling hoofs, going down, would trample out all trace of ninety going up!

The sheriff's eyes were gleaming in the dark, his lips were a tight line of determination.

He was beginning to get hold of the mystery with a vengeance.

He thought of the windy passage that opened into Blue Stone Cañon. If he could only find its head he would, as Smith had said, have solved the problem. And unless he missed his guess by a thousand miles, those steers streaming past him at the moment were headed for it now!

Here was the chance for which he had waited, for which he had ridden the hills for months, for which he had endured the contempt and the insinuations of the cattlemen.

Here was the chance to nail her crimes on Cattle Kate Cathrew, to make the "killing" of his years of failure in office—and Sheriff Price Selwood, brave man and honest officer of the law, took his life in his hand again and fell in beside the herd.

Dark, quiet, shadowy—he was a rider among the riders, to all intents and purposes one of Kate Cathrew's men—and he was helping to drive Bossick's steers up to the foot of Rainbow Cliff!

From the few low-toned shouts and oaths he was able to identify the two men nearest him as Sud Provine and Caldwell, the foreman.

He thanked his stars for his own dark horse, his inconspicuous clothing.

It was hard going up the steep slants of

Mystery Ridge, and kept every one busy to keep the cattle, unaccustomed to night driving and in strange country, headed in the right direction and all together.

But they did the trick like veterans and after a long, hard drive, Selwood saw the rim-rock of Rainbow Cliff against the stars.

The herd was headed straight for the face of the cliff, and he expected soon to see the riders swing them east toward the corrals of Sky Line, but they did not do so. When the foremost steers were close under the wall Caldwell rode near and called to him, thinking him one of his men:

"Get around to the right," he said, "and keep close to Sud, Bill. I'll lead in myself. Take it slow. Don't want 'em to jam in the neck. When the first ones start behind th' Flange let 'em dribble in on their own time. All ready?"

The last two words were a high call addressed to all the men. From all sides of the herd, come to a full stop now, came replies and Selwood saw Caldwell ride away around to the right.

Turning his horse the sheriff followed promptly.

He was tense as a wire, alert, dreading discovery every moment, yet filled with an excitement which sent the blood pounding in his ears.

As he neared the face of the precipice on the right, he saw Provine sitting on his horse, saw Caldwell circle in to the wall and cutting in before the massed cattle, go straight along its length. The faint starlight was just sufficient to show up bulk and movement, not detail. He heard the foreman begin to call "Coee—coo-ee—coo-ee"—and the next moment he could not believe his eyes, for horse and rider melted head-first into the face of Rainbow Cliff, as a knife slices into a surface and disappeared! Caldwell's voice came from the heart of the wall, far away and muffled, calling "Coo-ee—coo-ee"—Provine edged in against the steers, shouting, he followed suit, as to movement, though he did not speak, and the dark blot of the mass began to flow into the solid rock of the spine that crowned Mystery Ridge!

Sheriff Selwood had solved the mystery of the disappearing steers—knew to a certainty who were the rustlers of Nameless River—and he could not get away with his knowledge quickly enough.

Therefore he reined his horse away to the left, dropped back along the herd, edged off a bit—a bit more—sidled into a shadow—slipped behind the pine that made it—and putting the bay to a sharp walk, went down the mountain.

As the sounds behind him lessened he drew a

good breath and struck a spur to his horse's flank.

And right then, when there was most need, the good bay who had served him so long and faithfully, betrayed him.

He threw up his head, flung around toward the strange horses he was leaving, and neighed —a sharp, shrill sound that carried up the slope like a bugle.

At the mouth of the Flange Big Basford stopped.

His own mount answered.

Once more came that challenge from below and Sud Provine came back out of the hidden passage on the jump.

"God damn!" he shouted, "that ain't a Sky Line horse! Boys—we're caught! Come quick!"

Selwood, far down the trail, knew with a surge of rage that the game was up and that he was in for it. He knew in the same second, however, that his own horse was fresh, while those others were not.

He clapped down hard with both spurs, got a good grip on his old gun, and sailed down the steep trail—"hell bent for election," as he thought grimly.

He had a fair start and meant to make the most of it.

And he knew his horse.

Knew that this long-legged bay was the best

horse in the country, save and except Sud Provine's grey gelding with the filed shoe, and perhaps the rangy black which his new friend Smith rode.

He could have wished that the grey was not behind him.

It was dangerous work taking the slope of Mystery at a run, but there was danger behind and he chose the lesser evil.

As if to make up for its defection the lean bay stretched and doubled like a greyhound and Selwood leaned low on its neck as best he could for the pitch—for he was listening for lead.

He knew he was out of six-gun range, but he knew also that Sud Provine carried a rifle always on his saddle.

The roar of horses running under difficulty—leaping, stiff-legged, sliding here and there—came down like an avalanche of sound, but there were no voices mingled with it. The Sky Line men were riding in a silence so grim that it sent a chill to Selwood's heart. They meant death—and were avid for it.

He knew he was holding his own in the break-neck race, and presently it seemed he was gaining slightly. He came as near to praying as one of his ilk could do, that the good bay horse might keep its feet, for a fall now would be as fatal as capture.

The trees sailed by against the stars, rushing

up from the dim darkness below to disappear into it above, and the wind sang in his ears like a harp.

It seemed incredible that the tediously climbed slope could be so quickly descended—for he saw the thickening shadows of the mountain's foot racing up toward him, the pale gleam of water beyond which meant the river. And then he heard what he had been dreading—the snap of a rifle, the whine of a ball. Sky Line, giving up capture, was trying for destruction.

It was Provine he felt sure who held the gun.

He dug in his spurs cruelly and the bay responded with a surge of speed which seemed certain death, but kept its feet miraculously. Once more came the snap and whine—again—and again—and again—as fast as the man behind it could pump the rifle.

And then, just as the bay struck the waters of Nameless with a leap and a roar, it seemed to Selwood that the heavens opened up, that all the fire in the universe flamed in his brain.

He swung far out to the left, a terrible lever of weight to the gallant animal floundering beneath him, and made the supreme physical effort of his life to get back into his saddle. His fingers dug into the wet mane like talons, he clawed desperately with his right heel and felt the spur hook.

For what reason he could not have said, he

opened his mouth and screamed—a hoarse, wild sound, like the soul's farewell to its flesh. Perhaps he thought it was.

Sud Provine, sitting his shivering horse where he had drawn it to a sliding stop on the trail above, deliberately shoved his gun into its saddle-straps.

"I guess that's th' last of you, my buckko," he gritted, "that's your last ride, damn you! See how you like th' water."

And he turned back up the slope.

At dawn McKane, who slept in the store at Cordova, heard something untoward. It was a rapping that seemed to come from the floor of the porch outside—an odd, irregular stroke, as if the hand that made it was uncertain.

He rose, drew on his pants and hooking his suspenders over his shoulders as he went, opened the front door.

A bay horse, gaunt and bedraggled, stood at the porch's shoulder-high edge, and hanging half out of its saddle, held only by the right spur still caught in the hair cinch and one arm around the pommel, was the sheriff.

His ghastly face was red with blood from the long wound which had split his scalp from just above the left ear across the temple to the end of the eyebrow.

The trader leaped forward, jumped to the ground and caught him in his arms.

"My good God, Price!" he cried, "say you ain't dead! You ain't bad hurt—Oh, my God!"

Selwood looked at him with eyes that seemed dull as ashes.

"——solved—mystery——" he said thickly. "——rustlers—raid—caught with the goods—they are——"

The thick voice failed and Sheriff Price Selwood slumped down heavily on the shoulder of his erstwhile friend.

It was to be long before he would finish his cryptic sentence.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ANCIENT MIRACLE

News in the mountains travels fast, by mysterious ways, and in places where it seems impossible. Also it has marvelous powers of mutation. What may start out far down on Little Beaver Dam as an innocent prank, is liable to reach the Upper Sweet Water as a full-fledged scandal.

So it was on Nameless that drowsy day in August.

Nance Allison was busy about her work in the scoured kitchen, with Sonny Fair following her like a small-sized shadow.

In the dim regions beyond Mrs. Allison was in bed with a "sick headache." The balls of the carpet-rags had been sadly put away, all finished and ready for the loom, but farther away from that desired goal than ever. It seemed to Nance that that carpet was the last straw, the ridiculous small pressure that had all but snapped the thread of her control. Whenever she thought of Kate Cathrew she thought not of her Pappy, not of Bud with his sagging shoulder, not of her burned stacks and her field

of growing corn, but of the bare floors of her poor home.

There was a frown between her golden brows these days, a grim set to her lips, and she spent many hours on her knees beside her bed praying for guidance, for strength to keep to her narrow way. But the "stirrings" that she felt inside her in the spring had become a seething turmoil of passion, hard to hold.

"I'm like the patriarchs of old," she thought to herself, "filled with righteous wrath. If it wasn't that I have the light of the New Testament I'm afraid I'd go forth and slay my enemies, or try to."

"What you whimpering about, Nance? Tell me, too," said the child hugging her knees and looking adoringly up with his soft brown eyes.

"My gracious! Was I whimpering, Sonny?" she asked aghast, "I must be getting pretty far gone, as Brand says. Nance was thinking, that's all—thinking about bad things that make her heart ache."

"Our enemies?" he asked quaintly.

She nodded.

"Yes—they're ours, all right. Yours and Brand's and mine."

There was a vague comfort in this association, in the common cause that seemed to bind her and hers to Brand and Sonny Fair.

Brand and Sonny Fair—her thoughts went off

on the tangent which those two names always started.

It was part of the trouble which made the frown habitual—the frown, so alien to the sweet and open face of this girl.

Always there was under the surface of her mind the running question—What was Brand Fair to Sonny? And always there lurked in the dim background the word—Father. Was it true? Was the child his son? And if it was true—where and who was the mother?

A deep and terrible ache seemed to take her very bones at this thought—a misery which she could not understand.

She shook herself and sighed and tried to smile down at the boy, but the effort was a failure.

"Nance," he asked soberly, "don't you love me any more?"

The girl dropped on her knees and gathered him to her breast in a fierce gesture.

"Love you? Honey child, Nance loves every inch of your little body! She loves you so well she's scared to death Brand will come along some day and want to take you away again!"

She sat back on her heels and smiled at him, this time successfully. If there was one spot of light in the darkness of her troubles it was the child. Always his pleading eyes, his shy caresses could lighten the load.

And so it was that presently she fell to laughing in her old light-hearted way, sitting back on her heels on the clean white floor and rolling the child this way and that.

Screams of delight from Sonny punctuated the strokes of his bare feet as he kicked in the hysterical ecstasy of Nance's fingers "creep-mous"-ing up his little ribs.

They did not see Bud standing in the door, so absorbed in their game were they, until he moved and his shadow fell across them.

Nance turned her laughing face up to him—and stared with the laughter set upon it.

The boy was white as milk, his eyes black with terrible portent.

"Bud," she cried, "what's up? What——"

"The rustlers were out last night," he said slowly with a strange hesitation—"I met Old Man Conlan going down to Cordova—a man was shot—they think it is—the prospector—Smith."

For a moment Nance sat still on her heels, her mouth open, the sickly lines of laughter still around it.

Then she put out a hand that was beginning to shake—like an aged hand with palsy.

"Smith?" she gasped, "that's—Brand Fair! Oh—oh—dear Lord—*Brand Fair!*"

For the first time in her life the bright sun-

light faded out and Nance Allison, who had fought so long and hard against tremendous odds, who had held her battle line and borne all things with the courage of a strong man swayed back upon the floor.

Bud sprang forward to left her up, but already the weakness was passing and she put him aside, getting to her feet.

She forgot the child at her knee.

"His enemies——" she was muttering to herself, "and mine—they got him—at last—just as they tried to get me—and Jehoshaphat rose and went against his enemies—and the Lord was with him—I—I—Bud, give me that gun."

She took the rifle out of his hands with a savage motion and went from the cabin, swaying like a drunkard.

At the corner of the stable she came face to face with Fair, who was just coming up from the river on Diamond.

She stopped and stared at him like one in a daze.

"You?" she said presently. "You—Brand?"

The man saw at once that there was something gravely wrong and dismounted quickly.

He came forward and laid a hand on hers where it grasped the weapon.

"Sure—my dear," he said carefully, "don't look so, Nance—I'm all right. Let me have this," and took the gun away.

He put his right arm gently around her and looked over her head at her brother.

"Tell me," his eyes commanded.

"I just told her what I heard this morning," said Bud, "that a man was shot by rustlers and that it was Smith—you. She said something about one of the Bible men who went out and slew his enemies—and she was starting for Sky Line, I think."

There was no need to ask more, for Nance had covered her face with her shaking hands and bending forward on Fair's breast was weeping terribly.

The man drew her close and held her, and the dark eyes that gazed down at her shining head with its neat braids, were grave and very tender.

At last he said quietly, "It was our friend, Sheriff Selwood, but he is not dead. He's at his ranch, but he cannot talk—and no one knows who shot him. Sky Line drove down this morning—all regular and humdrum. McKane says Selwood knows—that he tried to tell him who the rustlers of Nameless are, but that he could not. When he comes round there'll be something doing in this neck of the woods, or I miss my guess. Come, Nance—aren't you going to invite me to dinner? I've got four prime grey squirrels in my saddle-bags, and my canteen's

full of honey—found a bee tree down the river."

And with the gentle tact of deep understanding and something more, Fair drew Nance back from the edge of tragedy to the safe ground of the commonplace.

She straightened up, wiped her hands down across her cheeks and looked at him with eyes in which the tears still glistened.

"I thought," she said unsteadily, "that Kate Cathrew had had you shot."

"She'll have to get up earlier than I do if she pulls that trick," he laughed, "I've been too long on guard."

Two days later Nameless was ringing with the news of the raid and Bossick was grim and silent.

When the Sky Line riders came back from their drive they rattled into Cordova for the mail and stood on the porch.

"Still watchin' your range?" queried Provine insolently as he swung out of his saddle and without a word the rancher leaped for him. He caught him by the neck and they both fell under Silvertip's feet. The horse sprang away and in a second the two men were trying to kill each other with all the strength there was in them.

"You damned dirty thief!" gritted Bossick, "if the law won't get you I'll take a hand!"

He was a heavy man, stocky and square, with tremendous thews, but the other was the wiry type and younger, so that they were not so unevenly matched, and it bade fair to be a lively affray.

But Big Basford, temper flaming as usual, pulled his gun from the holster and flung it down in line.

"Roll over, Sud!" he shouted, "I'll fix him!"

Provine endeavored to roll away from Bossick, but the rancher held him, pounding him the while with all the fury of outraged right, and the blue gun-muzzle in Basford's hand traveled with their convolutions, seeking a chance to kill his man.

The huge unkempt body leaned down from its saddle, the red eyes glittered and that traveling muzzle stretched closer to the men on the ground. It looked like certain death for Bossick, when there came the sudden crack of a gun from the doorway, and the weapon dropped from Basford's broken hand. The horse he was riding screamed and reared with a red ribbon spurting from its breast where the glancing ball had seared it.

"I'm sorry to hurt the horse," said Smith the prospector, watching the group with narrow dark eyes above the steady barrel, "but I'm not so particular with assassins. We'll see fair play."

And they did see fair play, a tense and silent gathering the Sky Line men sitting their horses on the one side, McKane, Smith, the bearded man from the Upper Country who had witnessed another fight on the same spot, and several more, on the other.

It was stone-hard fair play without quarter, and when it was over Bossick rose, a bloody and disheveled figure, and glared at the riders.

"Take him home," he said, "to your rustlers' nest, you —— —— ——!"

"That's fighting talk, Bossick," said Caldwell in a thin voice, "but this ain't th' time or place."

"You're damn right, it ain't!" said Bossick, "not when there's even numbers and no odds for you! You'll wait for dark and one man alone—like Price Selwood was."

Sud Provine, getting dizzily to his feet, shot a lightning glance at the speaker. His pulped face lost a shade of color. No one spoke and Bossick went on.

"When Selwood comes round I'm layin' there's goin' to be such a stir-up as this country never saw—and don't you forget it!"

"Comes round?" said Caldwell, as if the words were jerked from him against his will.

"Yes—comes round so he can talk—can tell what he knows of the rustlers of Nameless and who was the dirty skunk that shot him in the

back. There's a good coil rope inside this store that's going to make history for the Deep Heart cattle country."

"Hell!" said Caldwell, and laughed in a high thin treble as he pulled his horse around, "you're amusin', Bossick."

"Yes," snapped Bossick balefully, "your whole bunch seems quite hilarious. Now, get out of Cordova."

Without another word being passed on either side the Sky Line men rode out in a compact bunch, Provine and Basford nursing their hurts, the rest silent.

Bossick turned to the stranger.

"I want to thank you, Mister," he said, "for being here."

"It was a very great pleasure," said Brand Fair, alias Smith. "I thought perhaps I'd forgotten how to shoot."

With that he mounted Diamond and rode away, but two hours later he was waiting for Bossick on his home trail, where he intercepted him.

"Mr. Bossick," he said, "I think you're solid, so I take this liberty. I want to tell you that Sheriff Selwood and myself have picketed Sky Line for some weeks, alternately—so it *was* a Cathrew man who shot him, beyond question. Now let's talk."

A little later Bossick knew all that Brand and

the sheriff knew concerning the hidden passage that opened into Blue Stone, and he was softly profane with amazement.

"There's Old Man Conlan," he told Fair, "and Jermyn and Reston farther up, who can be depended on. We'll go to them at once."

"I didn't trust McKane," said Fair, "do you?"

"In one way he's all right—in another, no. He's crazy over Cattle Kate Cathrew and would certainly serve her if possible. It's best he doesn't know any more than he does. You were wise to come out here to talk."

Fair laughed.

"I've set a guard around the sheriff's house," he said, "put six of his cowboys on double shift. I knew they would find out that he is still alive and might try to finish the job—so he would never talk—Sky Line, I mean. And now, Mr. Bossick, I think we'd better go talk to Jermyn and the rest. I'm only sorry Selwood isn't able to be with us."

"This is a pretty bunch to bring back to me, Caldwell," said Kate Cathrew, tapping her foot with a whip, "one man disabled and another pounded into jelly. Who's this damn stranger who's so handy with his gun?"

"Name's Smith," said the foreman sulkily, "and I'd better tell you right now, that Selwood

isn't dead. He's alive and they're waiting for him to come round so he can—talk."

Cattle Kate's face flamed red.

"*Not dead?* Bring Provine here!"

But she would not wait as was her wont when summoning her men. She whirled and strode along the veranda to meet Provine who came in no good grace.

"I've a notion to kill you on the spot!" she cried furiously, "you fool bungler! Of all the crazy, wild, impossible things! Why didn't you *get* that man? The one person in the world who knew of The Flange and Rainbow's Pot behind! You let him get away!"

"Done my best," said the man evilly, "an' to hell with those who don't like it."

Quick as a flash the woman raised her whip and struck him.

With a roar he returned the blow, and Big Basford who had followed, leaped for him, clawing with his good hand, but Caldwell knocked Provine down instead.

"Take him away," said Kate Cathrew coldly, her hand at her cheek, "Lawrence Arnold will be here soon. I'll let him deal with this."

It was night again and the stars were hung like lanterns in the sky. The little wind was coming up the river, the little soft wind that Nance Allison loved.

Once more she sat in the doorway with Brand Fair beside her. There was no light on the table this time, so that she could not see his face with its quiet dark eyes, its thick hair above and the straight line of his lips with their gentle smile. But the feel of his arm against her own as he held the sleeping child, set up that nameless longing in her, the glowing glory of unknown joy which had become of late a sadness.

She was filled with vague sorrows and premonitions, as if, having found the priceless possession of this man's companionship, she was about to lose it.

It was not death wholly that she feared, but a more subtle thing, an inhibition of the spirit, a gulf that seemed to lie all shadowy between them—a dark, mysterious gulf wherein the imperious face of Kate Cathrew swirled amid the shadows.

But presently Fair spoke and she shook off her forebodings.

"Nance," he said softly, so low that his deep voice was scarce more than a whisper, "I have wanted to tell you more of my life and Sonny's for a long time, but somehow it seemed too bad to add another's burdens to those which you already bear, even though vicariously. However, the time seems nearly ripe for me to reap the reward, one way or another, of those years of effort and hardship which I have spent run-

ning Kate Cathrew to earth. What this reward will be I don't know, of course. No one can foretell. The men of Sky Line are a hard bunch, criminals and worse. They'll never be dug out of that nest of theirs without a fight and a hard one. Somebody's going to be killed, that's certain!"

He heard the girl catch her breath in a little gasp, and shifting Sonny, he put his arm around her.

"However it does come out, there's one thing I want to tell you, a package I want to give you for safekeeping. Will you listen, Nance?"

The big girl nodded dumbly. Her heart was throbbing painfully, the breath labored in her lungs. A trembling set up along her muscles, and the stars seemed to dance on the black velvet of the sky.

She was more conscious of that arm on her shoulder than she had ever been of anything in all her life. Its magnetic touch thrilled her to her fingertips.

Gently Fair leaned down until his face was against her cheek, tightened his clasp.

"I have been all over this land of ours," he said presently, "and in some several others. I have met many women—of many classes. I have been no saint and no great sinner. But always in my secret heart there has been a place all swept and garnished—and empty, Nance.

"That place—a holy spot, a shrine, if you will—most men would know what I mean—has been waiting—empty—all my life—because I never found the woman who fitted it. For its light there was no face to shine on, for its cool spaces no eyes to look down, for its marble floors no white feet to adore. Can you see what I mean, Nance, dear? It was the inner core of my heart, the veritable altar of my soul without a priestess.

"Since the day in Blue Stone Cañon when I first beheld you rocking the child in your lap—this secret place has been gloriously full. Nance—Nance—I have been like a worshipper without, laying my forehead to the sill. All the things I have dreamed of I find in you—the strength, the sweetness, the courage. You are beautiful as few women in this world are beautiful—and you are too good for any man. But I—have dared to love you."

He ceased and turned his lips against her cheek.

For Nance Allison the stars were singing together at the dawn of creation, the glory of the spheres had appeared before her.

"Answer me, girl," said Brand Fair tremulously, "tell me what's in your heart."

"I—I——" said Nance, "I—think it is the light from the open gates of Paradise—the smile of God Himself—because I am so happy!"

"Sonny, old-timer," said Fair, "here's where you take a back seat for once," and he rolled the child, still sleeping like the healthy little animal he was, over on the floor.

When the man arose to go some aeons later he gave Nance the package which he had taken from a pocket.

"Keep it, Sweetheart," he said, "and open it if—anything happens to me. It contains information vital to Sonny's life and future—the address of the New York lawyer who knows all my affairs and his, and also copies of the proof he holds which can send Cattle Kate and Arnold and all their lot behind the bars for life. Take it straight to Sheriff Selwood if you have to act for me, and if he is alive and conscious. If not, Bossick will do in his stead. He's a good man. There's a picture in that package. Nance—the face of Sonny's mother. But I'm not figuring that you'll have any call to open it—not by a long shot. This is all by way of wise precaution, you know. Now give me one more kiss."

Brand Fair rode away and the girl he left upon the cabin's step was too far adrift on the seas of happiness to realize that he had not told her the one thing vital—who was Sonny's father?

CHAPTER XVII

THE FACE IN THE PACKAGE

At last Nance Allison knew the meaning of the great light that seemed to glow upon all the world of the Deep Heart hills.

Instinct awoke in her and she beheld the face of love.

The knowledge set her trembling to her soul's foundation, sent her to her knees beside her big bed that she might return to that high Tribunal which arbited her ways such a deep devotion of thanksgiving as she had never made before.

Abasement seized her.

What was she in her loneliness and poverty, that such a man as Brand Fair might find her worthy?

What had she ever done of valor that one might admire her?

There was no light of courageous deeds upon her sordid life, no record of spectacular events in which she figured.

She had merely been a drudge, working out her soul to carry on her father's dreams of empire, to hold fast the place which he had left to her and hers.

She had only labored and stood firm, watching with anguished eyes the fruits of those labors being destroyed—she had made no effort to strike back at her enemies.

And despite all this, Brand Fair loved her!

Loved her and had laid his lips to hers in the first love-kiss of her life!

Verily was she blessed beyond all reason and she lifted up her heart in praise.

She did not see the austere beauty of that stern strength which held her true in the midst of affliction, which lifted those patient blue eyes of hers to the tranquil Heavens above her ruined fields, her burned stacks, which made her love her lonely land, her people and her God with unshaken devotion, which gave her peace in danger and set before her the burning beacon of right which could not fail to triumph.

She only knew that she, lone toiler in an unfriendly wilderness, had been anointed of the Lord with unspeakable glory, and she was bowed into the dust with gratitude.

It was a holy night she spent upon her knees in the soft darkness with her work-hardened hands clasped on the ancient coverlet and the long gold lashes trembling and wet upon her cheeks. It was an offertory, an adoration and a covenant.

She felt the hours pass with benediction.

Once she looked toward the little window and

saw the unfamiliar stars of the after-night upon the curtain of the sky.

She heard the child's soft breathing in the improvised crib beyond, and at false dawn she heard Old John crow from the rafters.

At the first grey light she lifted her face and with a smile at her lips' corners she murmured the ancient words of David's immortal thanksgiving:

> "The King shall joy in Thy strength, Oh, Lord; and in Thy salvation how greatly shall he rejoice! For Thou hast made him most blessed forever; Thou hast made him exceeding glad with Thy countenance. Thou hast given him the desire of his heart. Selah."

"Mammy," she said at breakfast, "I've got to tell you something—you and Bud."

There was a soft radiance about her long blue eyes, a helpless surrender to the smiles that would keep coming on her features.

Her mother looked at her calmly.

"Well?" she said.

But over Bud's young face there passed a spasm of pain.

"You needn't tell it," he said sharply, "we know—don't we, Mammy? It's Brand——"

"Sure, we know, Nance, honey," said Mrs. Allison gently, "an' we want to tell you, Bud

an' I, how plumb happy we are—how glad we are to see happiness come to the best daughter, the best sister, two people ever had on this here earth. Ain't we, Buddy?''

The boy swallowed once, then looked at Nance and smiled.

It was not the least courageous thing he was ever to accomplish, that smile, and his mother knew it, for he adored the girl, and she had been his only playmate all his life.

But at his mother's sutble words jealousy died and love stepped back triumphantly.

''We sure are, Sis,'' he said and kissed her on the cheek.

The child slept late that morning. Perhaps he had been more or less disturbed by Nance's wakefulness. She stepped to the bedroom door once and looked at him, but left him there.

''We might as well sit down,'' she said, ''he's fast asleep yet and I can feed him when he does get up.''

They talked gaily all through the meal, reviewing the wonder that had come to Nance, and it seemed a new future was opening before them all.

''Brand seems like one of us already,'' said Mrs. Allison, ''an' I think with joy what a help he'll be to you an' Bud—th' land is rich an' will keep us all in plenty with a man like him to manage an' to stand between us an' Sky

Line. An' he's like your Pappy was—kind an' still, a strength an' a hope for us. If Bud is willin' we'll offer him share an' share."

"Sure," said the boy decidedly.

When he had once capitulated Bud stood firm, wholeheartedly backing his decision.

"I just don't seem able to grasp it all," said Nance happily, "it seems like our whole life has changed overnight. There is light where darkness was, hope again where I'd about given it up—and now we'll never have to give up Sonny."

"That's so!" cried Mrs. Allison, "an' I hadn't thought of that. Never seemed like we would any way—bless him."

"Me?" asked a fresh little voice from the doorway, and the child stood there, rumple-headed, in his small night-gown made from flour-sacks. The faded red lettering still stood frankly out across his diminutive stomach.

"Yes—you," said Nance, "come here to your own Nance."

Sonny sidled in, holding up the hindering garment with one hand, the other shut over some small article.

As Nance lifted him to her lap he laid this on the table's edge.

"See," he said, "the pretty lady. She was in a bundle on your bed—where'd you get her, Nance?"

And Nance Allison looked down into the pictured face of—Cattle Kate Cathrew.

For a moment the laughter still drew her lips, the soft light of happiness still illumined her eyes.

Then the light and the laughter were erased from her features as if an invisible hand had wiped them.

In their place came first a blankness, an incredulity—then, as realization and memory struck home to her brain, the anguish of death itself swept across her face.

She stared with dilating pupils at the small picture.

"Nance!" cried her mother, "*Nance!*"

She raised her eyes and looked at Mrs. Allison and the latter felt a chill of fear.

"Take—Sonny, Bud," she said slowly, "and get his clothes."

Bud, tactful and quiet, did as she asked, and when she was alone with her mother the girl held out the picture.

"Brand told me—last night," she said haltingly, "that a package he gave me—to open in case anything happened—to him—held the face of—of—of Sonny's mother. This is Cattle Kate Cathrew."

"My good Lord A'mighty!" ejaculated Mrs. Allison.

Nance nodded.

"Then—who's his—father?"

"Who d'you suppose, Mammy?" asked the girl miserably, "I'm afraid it's Brand—the man who says he loves me!"

The gaunt old mother came round the table and put an unaccustomed arm about her daughter's shoulders. Caresses were rare with her.

"No," she said decidedly, "Brand Fair ain't a deceiver. I'd stake a lot on that. I feel to trust him, honey. Whatever is wrong in this terrible tangle, it ain't Brand—an' you can take your old Mammy's word on that."

The girl straightened her shoulders, lifted her head.

"I do trust him, Mammy," she said gallantly, "whatever has happened in the past I know it has not made him a liar—and I feel to be ashamed of myself."

"Needn't," said Mrs. Allison succinctly, "it's natural—th' age-old instinct of jealousy. Come down from our naked ancestors when th' man was th' food-getter an' th' woman fought with tooth an' nail if another female hove in sight. You'd like to go right out now an' scratch that woman's eyes out, wouldn't you?"

A sickly smile trembled on Nance's lips.

"I guess I would," she said unsteadily, "because—you see—if—if she's his wife—why—he can't take another."

"There's divorce laws in this country, ain't there? How do you know she's his wife now?"

"Mammy," said Nance gratefully, "you're the most wonderful woman I ever knew! You've got more reason than a houseful of lawyers. And I'm going to take heart right now. I'll put this picture away in the package and wait till Brand is ready to tell me all about it—and I'll stand steady in my love and my faith."

"That's my big girl!" said the mother, "now get to work at something. It's th' best cure-all on earth."

Cattle Kate Cathrew sat on the broad veranda at Sky Line. She was clad like a sybarite, in shining satin. Rings sparkled on her fingers, lights sparkled in her hard eyes, a close-held excitement was visible in her whole appearance. She looked down across the vast green-clad slopes of Mystery and held her breath that she might the better listen for a sound in the stillness.

For she was waiting for the writer of those letters, the man from New York who came at regular intervals to bask in the peace of Sky Line—for Lawrence Arnold himself.

It had been months since she had seen him, and the passion in her was surging like molten lava.

It made her heart beat in slow, heavy strokes, too deeply charged for swiftness. It made her lips dry as fast as she could wet them, set a feeling of paralysis along the muscles of her arms.

She was in a trance of expectation, as exquisite as the fullest realisation. She had been so ever since the departure at early dawn of Provine with a led horse—none other than Bluefire whose proud back no one but this man ever crossed, except herself.

For three hours she had sat in the rustic rocker like a graven image, her hands spread on the broad arms, her immaculate black head seemingly at rest against the back.

And not a soul at Sky Line would have disturbed her.

From a distant corral where he tinkered at some trivial task Big Basford watched her with wild red eyes. At these times the man was a savage who would have killed Arnold joyfully had the thing been possible. Minnie Pine, busy at the kitchen window, watched him.

"The Black Devil is in hell, Josefa," she said guardedly, "he knows the master's coming—and that the Boss will lie in his arms."

"He pays for his sins," said Josefa calmly, "which is more than the others do."

"Rod," returned the half-breed, "has no sins."

"He-ugh! He-ugh!" laughed the old woman, "so says the young fool because she loves him."

"I know what I know," said Minnie, "the Blue Eyes has a clean heart. One sin, maybe, yes—or two, maybe—but he sits sometimes with his head in his hands, and he mourns—like our people for death. *He* says it *is* for death—death of a man's honor killed by mistake. *I* know, for I've sat with him then—and he has put his face in my neck."

There was a high beauty about the simple words and the ancient dame looked at the girl with understanding. For a moment the cynicism was absent.

"You speak truth," she said softly, "the man is a stranger to these others. Also he is of a white heart. He should have been a Pomo chief in the old days.

Noon came and passed and Kate Cathrew did not eat.

She watched the sun drop over toward the west, the pine shadows turn on the slopes.

And then, far down, she caught the sound of hoofs and rose straight up from her chair, one hand on her thundering heart. The action was her only concession to the fierce emotion which was eating her. When Sud Provine came out of the pines below with Bluefire and his rider in convoy she was seated again in the

broad-armed rocker, to all intents as calm as moonlight on snow.

Lawrence Arnold dismounted stiffly and handed the rein to Provine, then raised his eyes and looked at her.

Over his white-skinned, aquiline features there passed a smile of the closest understanding.

He knew the volcano covered in and shut from sight under this woman's cool exterior—this woman who was his woman.

Cattle Kate rose languidly and came to meet him and her brilliant eyes returned the understanding to the *nth* degree—they were full of passion, of promise.

"Man," she said under her breath, as their hands met, "Oh, man! It's been so long!"

That was all for the prying eyes that compassed them.

They entered the house and Minnie Pine served the meal which had been waiting and which was the best Sky Line could produce, and afterward Lawrence Arnold reclined on a blanket-covered couch in the living-room and smoked in smiling peace.

Kate Cathrew sat near, her eyes devouring his slim form, and talked swiftly of many vital matters.

"Do you need any new men?" he asked her,

"I have two who would be good. One is out on bail—mine—the other was acquitted, as usual. Both will crawl."

"No," said Kate, "and I want to give you back one I have—Provine. He is insubordinate. Deal with him hard."

Arnold nodded.

"Was the last shipment O.K.?" asked Kate. "Have I done well, my master?"

She smiled jestingly, but the title was true in every sense of the word.

"Exceedingly," he answered, "the shipment was prime and we cleaned up on it. In my grips there are several little trinkets for you, bought with some of the surplus. I commend you."

He reached for her hand and the woman flushed with pleasure.

"This new shipment," she said, "can you trust your agent to float it?"

"Absolutely, or I wouldn't be here."

"It goes out in a few days—as soon as the hue-and-cry dies down a bit. There is plenty of feed in Rainbow's Pot to hold the herd several weeks, if need be, but I like to get clear as quick as possible."

"Good work. You're a clever girl, Kate. We're making money fast. One thing more—have you succeeded in getting hold of the big feeding flats on the river?"

Kate frowned.

"No—the damned poor trash hang on like grim death. I've done everything but kill them, and they're still there."

"That's too bad," said the man, "I guess maybe you need a little help. What have you done?"

"Everything. Used all the arts of intimidation I know—and destroyed their livelihood."

"H'm," said Arnold, "must be a pretty courageous outfit. Who are they?"

"Old Missouri mother—boy—and a big slab-sided girl who's the whole backbone of the family. Impudent baggage. You remember when the old man—ah—fell down Rainbow a couple of years ago?"

Arnold nodded again.

"Well, they're trash—*trash,*" said Kate, "and stick to the flats like burrs. The girl's religious. Talked some drivel about the hand of God being before her face, and came out flat-footed and said—before a crowd at the store, too—that those flats would feed a lot of cattle through, and that maybe I had a—hope—concerning them."

"The devil she did!" said Arnold, sitting up. "I rather think you do need another head to handle this."

"And that isn't all," said the woman. "Sheriff Selwood is knocked out at present, but he watched the boys drive this last bunch into

the Pot. He rode to the very Flange itself. We've got to get these cattle down the Pipe and out before he comes round—though from what we can hear, it don't seem likely he'll come round. Sud shot him in the head. I think he'll die myself, or I'd have driven out by now."

Arnold was looking at her sharply.

"That's where you're wrong, Kate," he said decidedly, "never take chances on the human system. I've seen a man come to after being electrocuted. We'll get busy right now—to-morrow. In the meantime, please remember that I haven't seen you for many moons. Let's talk of love, tonight."

There was a step at the door, and a dusty rider stood there.

"Want to report," he said, "that I've just come up the Pipe and I found tracks—brushed out—at the mouth in Blue Stone—there were two men on foot. No hoof-marks. They looked in behind the willows."

Kate Cathrew rose straight up to her feet.

"Hell's fire!" she said.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FIGHTING LINE AT LAST

Brand Fair haunted the Selwood ranch. He hung to the side of the unconscious man almost night and day.

"What do you think, doctor?" he asked anxiously of the medical man brought in from Bement.

"Frankly, I don't think," said that worthy, "these lapses, superinduced by concussion, are treacherous things. He may recover suddenly, or he may die without regaining consciousness. It's a gamble."

But anxious as he was to know the secret locked in the unconscious brain of Price Selwood, Fair had not been idle.

He and Bossick had been very busy.

Many things had been done, a plan arranged, secret conclaves held at which grim and determined men sat their horses and pledged themselves to do a certain thing.

Then Fair went to the cabin on Nameless, for the longing in his heart to see Nance Allison grew with every passing hour.

He held her in his arms and kissed her fore-

head and her smooth cheeks, touched the shining coronet of her hair with reverent hands.

"Sweetheart," he whispered, after the age-old fashion of lovers, "there was never a woman like you! You are my light in dark places, my rain in the desert. Oh, Nance, what if I had never found you!"

And the girl leaned on his heart in an ecstasy of love that was shot with sadness, holding fast to her trust with desperate hands.

"It's bound to come soon now," he told her, "we are organized and ready—only waiting for Selwood, poor fellow, to regain his reason that he may tell us where to strike."

"There'll be gun-play and—blood," said Nance miserably, "and I pray God that you will not be taken. I—I couldn't lose you, Brand, and live. I wouldn't dare to live—for if they kill you—Oh, that black hatred which has stirred in me so long, is getting beyond my strength to hold it! I'll go mad and turn killer, Brand if they kill you! I know it—I feel it here——" she laid eloquent hands on her heart—"and then my soul will go into the pit of damnation."

"Hush!" said Fair holding her to him fiercely, "for the love of Heaven, don't talk so, child! And get that thought out of your head. Whatever happens, keep your hands clean from that crowd of ruffians—and always remember

that Brand Fair loved you. If we fail and the Sky Line people stay in the country, I beg you, Nance, to leave Nameless River. Take your mother and Bud—and—and Sonny—and go away to a more civilized spot. You can make another start. There's a little money in a New York bank for the boy—the papers in the package will explain—and I know you love him——"

But Nance laid her face on his breast and fell to weeping, so that Fair anathematized himself for his grave words.

"It seems," she said, sobbing, "that we have reached the bottom—of all things—hope—and—and strength—and happiness. And my grasp on God is failing—He has turned His face from me—I am lost to the light of His countenance—because of the hatred in me. I have stood firm through tribulation but now—when I think of you—I feel my strength desert me."

"Buck up," scoffed the man playfully, "we'll all come through with colors flying and see this nest of vipers caged. Then think of life on Nameless, Nance—safe and happy, with our fields and our herds and peace in all the land. I shouldn't have suggested anything else. Come—be my brave girl again, my good fighter."

Obedient to his words, Nance straightened and tried to smile in the starlight.

"That's it," he said, "you're resilient as willow wood—ready with a come-back. You'll

never leave the line, Sweetheart, never in this world!''

It was late in the night when Fair rode away.

He went south, going back to look again on the quiet face of Sheriff Selwood, then on to the Deep Heart fringes to meet Bossick and Jermyn.

As for Nance Allison, she was seized with a great restlessness that made inaction unbearable.

''I think I'll ride the lower slopes of Mystery, Mammy,'' she said next morning, ''and look for that black shoat that's missing. I can't afford to lose it.''

The mother looked at her with worried eyes.

''You take your Pappy's gun,'' she said at last. ''I feel to tell you so. Th' time has come.''

But the girl shook her head.

''I don't care,'' she said, ''I can't trust myself of late.'' She kissed Sonny, ran a hand over Bud's bronze hair, and went out to the stable where she saddled Buckskin and rode away.

Dirk, sitting gravely on the door-stone, begged to go with her, but she forbade him.

So she passed the bleak ruin of her cornfield, crosed the river, low in its summer ebb, and struck up among the buck-brush and manzanita that clothes the lower slopes.

It was a sweet blue day with the summer haze on slant and level, cool with the little winds that were ever drawing up between the hills, silent with the eternal hush of the far places.

All the wilderness smiled, the heavens, blue and flecked with sailing clouds, were soft as infants' eyes.

Nature opened appealing arms to this child of her bosom and Nance, sad and apprehensive as she had never been in her life before, went into them and was comforted.

She raised her eyes to the distant rimrock, shining above Rainbow Cliff which was dark and sombre at this early hour, and felt its austere beauty. She watched the cloud-shadows drifting on the tapestried shoulders of the mountains and knew the sight for what it was of privilege and blessing.

So, as the little horse beneath her scrambled eagerly up the slants, the peace of the waiting hills fell upon her with healing and the sadness eased away.

In every likely place she looked and listened for the black shoat, but it seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth, like the six fat steers. She followed a small ravine for longer than she had intended, sat for a while in a sunny opening high along the breast of Mystery, and sidled back toward the west again.

And here it was that two men far above looked down and saw her with ejaculations of delight.

"Well, if this ain't luck!" said Provine grinning, "then I'm a liar! I thought this morning when Arnold handed us that last bunch of instructions that he was due for once to come out th' little end of th' horn. I didn't see how any human was goin' to be able to carry them out. I didn't think we'd ever get near enough to get her and do it on th' q. t. But she's brought herself to us!"

"If she's armed," said Caldwell shortly, "it's not time yet to crow. I think she'd fight."

"Fight, hell!" said the other, "she don't believe in fightin'. She's religious. We'll pick her up too easy an' present her to th' Boss with our compliments."

An hour later Nance, riding along a dim trail made by the traveling hoofs of deer, came out above a spring in a pretty glade.

She was warm and thirsty, so she dismounted and pushing back her hat from her sweated forehead, knelt on the spring's lip and putting her face to the limpid water, drank long and eagerly a foot from Buckskin's muzzle.

As she straightened up, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she caught a sound where had been deep silence before—the sound of something moving, the rattle of accoutre-

ments, and turning quickly, still upon her knees, she looked up into the grinning face of Sud Provine, the frowning one of the Sky Line foreman.

"By Jing!" said Provine wonderingly, "never havin' seen you outside that there ol' bonnet of yours I didn't know how purty you was! Them eyes now—they're right blue, ain't they? An' that wide mouth—all wet where you stopped wipin' it——"

"You damn fool!" said Caldwell disgustedly, "shut up and mind the business entrusted to you. Miss Allison," he said to Nance, "you're just the person we wanted to see. We were sent this morning to fetch you to Sky Line, so you may as well go along sensibly, for we'll take you any way."

Nance rose to her feet.

A pink flush came slowly up along her throat to dye her cheeks and chin. The slow heave inside her which she knew for the dangerous "stirrings" seemed to slow the beating of her heart to a ponderous stroke.

"Then you'll have to take me," she said curtly, "for I'll not ride a step with any one from Sky Line."

She swung into her saddle and struck her heels to Buckskin's sides in a forlorn hope of escape—little Buckskin, stocky, slow and faithful.

Provine laughed again and dashed forward with a leap of his grey Silvertip that put him alongside in a second.

"Ain't no use, purty," he said and caught her rein.

He turned the little horse up the slope, Caldwell fell in close behind and in a matter of two minutes Nance Allison was a prisoner headed for Sky Line Ranch.

The pink flush was gone entirely from her face, leaving it pale as wax. Her lips were faintly ashen.

"You needn't be so scared," said the irrepressible Provine, "we won't hurt you."

The girl turned her eyes upon him and they were black with the dilation of the pupils which always accompanied extreme emotion in her.

"Scared?" she said thickly, "I was never less scared in my life."

With the words she was conscious of a passionate longing for the feel of her Pappy's old gun in her hands.

"Help me, Lord!" she whispered inaudibly, "Oh, my God, be not far from me!"

They followed no trail, but cut through thicket and glade in a lifting angle well calculated to bring them out at the cluster of buildings at the foot of Rainbow Cliff.

This was new country to Nance.

She had never been so high on Mystery Ridge.

She noticed how the buck-brush and manzanita had given place to yew and pine and fir tree, how the slants steepened sharply as they neared the summit.

She had told the truth when she said she was not frightened.

There was no fear in her, only a deep and surging anger that seemed to make her lungs labor for sufficient air. Her usually smiling lips were set together in a thin line.

To a student of physiognomy she would have presented an appearance of volcanic repression, her very calmness would have been a danger signal.

But the two men who formed her guard were not of sufficient mental keenness to read the silent signs.

So, in silence, save for Provine's occasional jesting observations, they climbed the breast of the great ridge and presently struck into the well-worn trail which led direct to Sky Line.

The sun was well over toward the west and the towering rock-face was resplendent in its magic tints when they rode out of the clump of pines and saw the ranch house sitting low and spreading above its high veranda, in the open.

At the broad steps to the right Nance was ordered to dismount.

Provine took Buckskin and Caldwell motioned her to ascend the steps. With her head up and

her mouth tight shut Nance Allison strode forward into the stronghold of her enemies.

The door was open, and she saw first only a pale darkness within as she stopped on the threshold.

Then, pushed forward by the foreman with a none too gentle hand, her eyes slowly became accustomed to the shadowy interior and in spite of herself they widened with amazement at the splendor she beheld.

Sky Line was famed for its luxury, but most of this fame was hearsay. Nance knew instantly that it was pitifully inadequate.

The broad windows were shaded with tasseled satin drapes.

On the walls hung great paintings, deep and glowing with priceless art. Huge chairs, their rounded arms and rolling backs covered with velvet in pale shades of violet and orchid, sank their feet into the pile of moss green carpet, while here and there gleamed the cool whiteness of marble. This was the Inner Room. Beyond it opened that plainer one wherein Kate Cathrew did her every-day routine of work at the dark wood desk.

A man was sitting on a broad couch, a cigarette in his fingers. He was a stranger to Nance, a stranger to the country, but she catalogued him swiftly as the man from New York of whom all Nameless had heard. He was slim and fair

skinned, and the grey eyes, set rather close together across the arch of the high-bridged nose, were the sharpest she had ever seen in a human. A fox she had once seen caught in a trap had had just such eyes.

They were cold and appraising, without a spark of kindness.

In one of the gorgeous chairs Kate Cathrew, dressed like a princess, sat bolt upright.

At sight of Nance in her faded garments, straight and defiant in her controlled anger, her handsome face flushed beneath its artistry.

"Ah!" she said, like a vixen, "get—out—of—that—door. Step over to the right a bit, you obscure the light."

The big girl did not move.

She stood with her hat pulled down above her narrowed eyes, one hand on her hip.

"If you've got anything to say to me," she said coldly, "say it."

Kate Cathrew leaped to her feet, but the man put out a hand and touched her.

As if a spring had been released she sank down, obeying that calm touch like an automaton.

"Miss—ah—Allison," said Arnold, "there is no need for dramatics. Neither will they avail you. We wanted to see you—to talk business with you. So we sent for you."

"So I see," said Nance, "or rather you kidnapped me."

"Not so decided, please. We don't like such words. They are—ah—crude, I might say."

"Not half so crude as you will find the methods of Nameless when this gets out, I guess," said Nance. "Heaven knows I don't amount to much, but I am likely to be a torch for a fire that's smouldering."

"We have extinguishers," smiled Arnold. "Sky Line is a pretty fire department, if I do say it. The thing for you to do just now is—think. I'll give you ten minutes."

"I don't need them," said Nance. "I've thought for several years—about my father's death—my brother's crippled body—my missing cattle—my burned stacks—and many other things. I'm thinking now about Sheriff Selwood—and Bossick's latest loss."

The man's face hardened, yet a reluctant admiration drew a slight smile across it.

"You take liberties, Miss Allison. Are you not—speaking in jest—a little—ah—afraid to speak so broadly?"

Nance laughed bitterly, shifting on her feet in their worn boots.

"Afraid? No—not of you—nor of your hired rustlers—nor of Cattle Kate, there, with her paint and her tempers. I'm not afraid of anything but the wrath of God."

At that Arnold laughed outright.

"You have something yet to learn, I see. Very well, since you do not care to think I will outline briefly your situation. You know, of course, that you are at present in the power of Sky Line Ranch. Reasoning backward you will come to the conclusion that there is a primal cause for this. Reasoning forward you will know that there is something which you can do for Sky Line, which it wants of you."

"Of course," said Nance, "the whole country knows that—my flats on the river."

Arnold frowned.

He did not like that answer.

"And how, may I ask, does the country know this?"

"It knows what has happened to me for several years now—and it judges the faces of your riders and their boss."

"If you please, we'll leave Miss Cathrew out of this," said Arnold crisply.

"Yes?" asked Nance. "She's been the backbone of my troubles—under you, no doubt—and it isn't likely I'll leave her out. If you have anything to say to me I'd advise you to say it and get it over before Nameless comes hunting me."

"All Nameless may come hunting you, Miss Allison," returned the man, "but it will not find you. Now put your wits in order. Sky Line

wants those flats on the river—and means to have them. We don't do things by halves. What we undertake we finish. The time has come for decisive action. You have had many—ah—hints to vacate and have foolishly disregarded them. That is like a woman. A man would have gone long ago."

"Not any man," interrupted Nance, "my Pappy didn't."

"No?" said Arnold cruelly. "Is he here?"

Quick tears misted the girl's eyes, but the slowly throbbing anger burned them out.

"Yes," she said promptly, "and always will be—at the foot of our mountain—and in Bud and me. He has not yet been conquered."

Arnold dropped his dead cigarette into a tall brass receptacle, rose and stepped into the other room. He picked something from the desk there and came back.

"We come to cases," he said sharply. "I have here a properly made out deed, conveying to Miss Cathrew for the consideration of one dollar, the quarter-section of land herein described, lying along Nameless River, owned by the widow of John Allison, deceased, who took up said land under the homestead act. This paper needs only the name of John Allison's widow and two witnesses to make it a legal transfer of property. I am a notary. We can supply the witnesses—the highly important and

necessary signature of John Allison's widow you will obligingly furnish—at a price."

Nance's eyes were studying his face all the while he was speaking. They were black and narrow, without a visible trace of their serene blue. Now the lower lid came up across the excited iris like the blade of a guillotine.

"Let me understand you clearly," she said, "you are asking me to forge my Mammy's name to a deed to give away her home land—the land her husband patented and left her as her all? Is this what you are asking me?"

"Exactly," said Arnold, "but don't forget the condition—at a price, I said, you know—at—a price."

Nance swept off her hat and struck it down against her knee. A laugh broke stiffly on her tallow-white face.

"If I could swear," she said, "I'd tell you where to go, and what I thought you were. You may consider yourself told as it is."

Arnold became coldly grave.

"You refuse?"

"What do you think I do? Put your wits in order!"

The man turned and struck a bell which stood on a rosewood pedestal. Minnie Pine responded with suspicious promptness.

"Send me Provine and Big Basford," said Arnold briefly, and the girl departed.

The man did not speak again, nor did Nance.

Kate Cathrew sat still in her luxurious chair, here baleful black eyes traveling over the girl from head to foot with bitter interest.

There came a shuffle and rattle of spur and the two Sky Line riders stood in the doorway of the room beyond, having come through the kitchen.

"Miss Allison," said Arnold, "I own the men of Sky Line, how or why is unimportant. What I tell them to do, they do. Am I not right, men?"

Provine nodded easily.

Big Basford spoke sullenly.

"Yes, sir," he said.

"All right. Now, my girl, consider. There is on Sky Line a secret place——"

"I've always thought so," said Nance decidedly.

"Be quiet. A place which the whole of Nameless is not likely to find, so mysteriously is its entrance hidden. One could live there for a lifetime undiscovered—or be taken out as if on wings——"

"Like Bossick's disappearing steers!"

Arnold was exasperated, but held his temper.

"Exactly," he said, "if you will. Now consider again. You are a pretty fine specimen of a woman—quite likely to appeal to men—

especially to men long denied feminine companionship—like Basford there."

Nance flung a glance at Basford. His sullen, lowering face set in its thicket of beard with the red-rimmed eyes above was enough to chill the heart of any woman. The great ape-like body added its own threat. Her own intrepid spirit felt a shock of horror, but that deep anger in her left little room for fear.

She seemed to hear again Brand Fair's exultant words: "You'll never leave the line, Nance, never in this world!"

With a dogged courage heaving through the anger she looked back at Arnold.

"Well?" she said.

"Big Basford hasn't had a woman of his own for many moons, I know. Now—will you sign this deed—or will you go with Basford to Rainbow's Pot—his blushing bride?"

Nance's breast was heaving. Great breaths dilated her lungs and whistled out again. Her hands were shut tight, the fingers on her hat brim crimping the weathered felt.

She thought of her Mammy—of Bud—of their long labor and the hardships they had borne. She thought of the cabin on Nameless—of its white scrubbed floors—its homely comforts—and all it meant to them and to her. It was her Pappy's dream of empire—it had been hers.

She thought of Brand Fair and of Sonny. Of Brand and Bud who would sure start the fire to burning in all the lonely reaches at news of her disappearance—and—

"I'm as good as most men," she said, "to take care of myself. I wouldn't sign that paper to save you and all your rustler nest from eternal damnation! And that's my last word."

Arnold snapped his fingers.

"Enough," he said, "we'll see what a night in Rainbow's Pot will do for you. Basford—my compliments. I give you the beautiful lady. Properly disciplined she'll make you a fine wife."

But Big Basford shook his unkempt head.

"She's a yellow woman," he said contemptuously, "I don't want her," and his hungry eyes went helplessly toward the dark splendor of Kate Cathrew in her velvet chair.

Provine surged forward, a sudden excitement in his snaky orbs.

"*I* do," he cried, "try me!"

Arnold laughed.

"Good! I like an eager lover. *You* may guard Miss Allison inside, and Basford shall take the place I had intended for you outside the Flange. We'll talk business some more tomorrow. We bid you adieu, Miss Allison. I hope by morning you will be more amenable to reason."

Without a backward glance Nance turned and strode away between her guards. Resistance was useless, she well knew.

"'In my distress I cried unto the Lord and He heard me,'" she thought courageously. "'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help.'"

"One moment," called Arnold, still laughing, "remember that the Secret Way tells no tales—and that Provine has long wanted to go back to Texas."

The girl turned and glanced back.

"The hand of God," she said calmly, "is ever before my face. Neither you nor yours can do me harm for the Lord shall preserve me from all evil, He shall preserve my soul. And He did not make me strong for nothing," she added. "I shall leave it all to Him."

CHAPTER XIX

RIDERS OF PORTENT

Minnie Pine could get from one place to another more quickly and with less noise than any one at Sky Line.

When Rod Stone came in at dusk she came running to him in the shadows to whisper in his ear.

"The Sun Woman from the flats on Nameless," she said, "has thrown their words back in the faces of the Master and the Boss—and they have given her to Sud to guard—in Rainbow's Pot with Big Basford at the Flange. It's devil's work."

There was little or no expression on the half-breed's placid face, but there was plenty of it in her low voice.

"Good God!" said the boy, "are you sure, Minnie?"'

"I heard—and I saw," she answered, "and my heart is heavy for the pretty one with the eagle's eyes. She does not fear—but she does not know."

Rod Stone put out an arm and hugged the girl gently.

"You're a real woman, kid, if your skin is

brown," he said admiringly, "and after all, it's heart that counts. Now tell me about this."

They stood close together in the shadows of the fir beside the corral and the girl talked swiftly, recounting with almost flawless accuracy what had taken place in the Inner Room.

The boy was silent but his lips were tightly compressed and his blue eyes shone with wrath.

"I came," said Minnie frankly, "to you, because you are the only man at Sky Line. The rest are skunks. Josefa says you have the heart of a Pomo chief."

Stone stood for a long time considering.

Then he drew a deep breath and flung up his head.

The motion was full of portent, as if something in him which had long bowed down sprang aloft with vigor, like a young tree, bent to earth, released.

"You're right," he said, "it's devil's work and something must be done. I am the one to do it, too."

He was silent for another space. Then he turned to the girl.

"Kid," he said, "I've been thinking about you lately—about making a get-a-way down the Pipe some night and striking across the desert for Marston—we could find a parson there and drop over the Line into Mexico. Arnold hasn't much on me—perhaps less than on anyone at

Sky Line—and we could make a new start——"

There was the soft sound of an indrawn breath and Minnie Pine's hand went to her shapely throat.

Stone went on.

"If I do this—if I hit down for Cordova tonight—you know, of course, that it is very likely to be the end of me one way or another, in the general stir-up that will follow. I want you to know any way before I start—that I'd like that new beginning—with you."

For a long moment there was no sound save the myriad voices of the connifers talking mysteriously with the winds of night.

Then the Pomo girl put her hands on the white man's shoulders.

"A chief," she said, "does what must be done—without fear—and a chief's woman follows him—even to death. Saddle two horses."

* * * * * * * *

At Sheriff Price Selwood's ranch an anxious circle watched the still form on the bed. The doctor from Bement had not left his station for seven hours. Outside cowboys, all armed, walked here and there, and on the deep veranda sat the prospector, Smith, smoking innumerable cigarettes and waiting on destiny.

Though he was filled with inner excitement his dark face gave no sign. He sat tilted back

against the wall, his booted feet on the round of his chair, his hat pulled low over his eyes, and his keen vision sweeping the stretch of meadow that lay before the ranch house.

"It may be an hour—it may be ten—but something is going to happen soon," the doctor had said at dusk, "he will either rally or sink. If he speaks he will be rational, I think."

And on that chance the stranger waited to ask one question, namely: "What is the secret of Sky Line? Where is the other end of the passage?"

For all the hours that Price Selwood had lain unconscious fourteen men under Bossick had camped in a glade under the flaring skirts of Mystery's western end, ready to answer Fair's summons.

Diamond waited in Selwood's stable, saddled and fit, and everything waited on the intrepid sheriff himself who had done such valiant work "to get the goods" on Sky Line.

A late round moon was rising above the distant rim-rock of Rainbow Cliff, a great golden disc that promised full light, and all the little winds, born in the cañons of the Deep Heart hills, frolicked like elves among the trees.

Fair's thoughts were of the girl on Nameless —of her long blue eyes with their steady light, of her smiling lips and the golden crown of her braided hair.

He drifted away, as lovers have done since time was, and it was the low-toned voice of the doctor which recalled him.

"Mr. Smith," it said without a change of inflection, "come in carefully."

He rose and, tossing away his cigarette, stepped softly across the sill.

In the faint light of the oil lamp on a stand Sheriff Selwood looked up into the face of his wife, bending above him.

"Sally," he said weakly.

Then he turned his head and looked slowly around at the others.

"Hello, Doc," he whispered, then—"they didn't get me—after all! Smith—Smith——" a sudden light leaped into the dazed eyes, "I saw—them drive Bossick's—Bossick's steers into the face of—Rainbow Cliff a mile west—of Sky Line——"

"That's plenty," said Fair quickly, "you mustn't talk, Selwood—mind the doctor—I'm leaving now."

And with a gentle touch on the sick man's shoulder he was gone.

He ran to the stable and got Diamond.

Five of Selwood's riders were throwing saddles on horses.

In less time than seemed possible the six men were riding for the rendezvous on Nameless.

All along the flowing river there was the

seeming of portent, a strange sense of impending tragedy, for many riders were abroad in the quiet night.

One of these was Bud Allison, his young face set and awful, his Pappy's old rifle grasped in a steady hand, pushing Big Dan to an unaccustomed limit of speed toward Sheriff Selwood's ranch.

The boy was praying that he might find Brand there—and the old gun was destined for action.

But within the narrow margin of a mile Fair was passing toward the north as he went south—and thus Bud missed him with the news of Nance's disappearance. Had they met, the happennings of that night might have had a different ending, for Fair would have stormed the citadel of Sky Line like a fury, forgetting all things in his fear for the woman he loved—the ends of justice which he sought to serve, Bossick's steers and everything else.

And in the shadow of Rainbow Cliff Rod Stone and Minnie Pine waited patiently for the ranch to settle down that they might slip away.

It was a dark night, soft and soundless, with all things waiting in a mysterious hush.

At the camp on the skirts of Mystery, Fair found Bossick ready.

"Selwood's conscious," he told him quickly, "and his first thought was of his race for life.

He said 'they didn't get me after all,' and 'I saw them driving Bossick's steers into the face of Rainbow Cliff a mile from Sky Line.' That's the secret he discovered and for which they tried to kill him.

"There's some sort of opening in the rock face which connects with the subterranean passage that leads to Blue Stone Cañon, the desert range beyond, and finally to Marston on the railroad. That, gentlemen, is the secret of your disappearing cattle. Selwood said they always vanished at the same time Kate Cathrew drove her stock down to Cordova and out to the station—do you see?

"The drive, coming down to the river, obliterated all tracks of those going up. Now that we know I think we've got the Sky Line rustlers dead to rights. There are twenty-one of us.

"We'll divide you; you, Bossick, going with your party up to Rainbow Cliff, and I striking up through the mysterious passage. This trip will take a long hard grill, for it is far up Blue Stone to the south, and none of us know the length of the underground way.

"However, it must lead to some pocket not far from the cliff itself and on the inside. A gun-shot will locate us when we are ready for each other. Lord knows what we'll find, or what the outcome will be. Let's go."

And so it was that some time later Brand

Fair with his posse passed close along the upper edge of Nance Allison's ruined field and thought tenderly of the blue-eyed girl with her dogged courage and her simple faith, little dreaming that she was not safe in her bed in the cabin.

The hours of the night wore on.

Far down in the open reaches poor Dan was loping gallantly with open mouth and laboring lungs while the boy on his back drove him relentlessly on in a desperate attempt to overtake Fair, whom the sentries at Selwood's ranch had described as on the way to Mystery Ridge.

Crossing diagonally down, Rod Stone, safe away from Sky Line at last, made for Cordova with Minnie Pine behind him.

Bossick, having the shortest journey of all, sat in a clump of pines with his men around him, and waited in strained silence for a distant shot.

It was well after midnight when two things took place at almost the same moment—Brand Fair rode in behind the clump of willows that were always *blowing out* from the cañon's wall with his men in single file behind him—and Rod Stone got off his horse at Cordova. He handed his rein to the Pomo girl and went swiftly up the steps, opening the door upon the lighted

room where a group of men were playing. They were mostly from the Upper Country, though one or two were Cordovans. Among them were the bearded man who had sat on McKane's porch that day in spring and watched Cattle Kate come riding in on Bluefire, and the young cowboy with whom he had spoken concerning them.

Stone, a Sky Line man, received cold glances from the faces raised at his entrance. All Nameless knew and disapproved of Sky Line. But the boy was made of courageous stuff and he tackled the issue promptly.

"Men," he said sharply, "I'm from Sky Line, as you all know, and you may class me now as a traitor to my outfit. Perhaps I am. That's neither here nor there. I don't give a damn whether I am or not. I'd have stood true in all cases but one. That one has happened. There's a good girl—a Bible girl, like I used to know back in the middle west—shut up in a secret spot with Sud Provine— and I've got to have help to save her and that quick. She's a fighter, I think, and is strong—but—you all know Provine. I don't know what I'm stirring up and I don't care. Will you come?"

Every chair at the dirty canvas-covered table but one shot back and outward as the players rose.

"Where's this here spot—an' who's th' girl?" said the cowboy. "Lead us to 'em."

"In Rainbow Cliff—and the Allison girl from the homestead on the River."

"Th' hell you say! Ain't that poor kid had enough trouble?"

But McKane the trader spoke from where he sat, frowning.

"Ain't you all taking a lot for granted?" he asked, "and mussing in Kate Cathrew's business?"

The bearded man turned on him.

"Damn Kate Cathrew's business! She can't give a decent girl to that slimy rep-tile Provine and get by with it in this man's country—not by a damn sight! Get your horses, boys!"

As the players surged out, McKane, obeying some apprehensive instinct which pulled at his heart like a cold hand, rose and followed.

"Wait till I get mine!' he shouted as he ran.

CHAPTER XX

CONCLUSION

When Nance Allison mounted Buckskin at Kate Cathrew's door a terrible weight hung at her heart, yet a current of strength seemed flowing in her veins.

"'The Lord is the strength of my life,'" she thought valiantly, "'of whom shall I be afraid?'"

The courage of the familiar words had been with her through many bitter trials—it did not fail her now.

But she was not conscious that she no longer called upon her Maker for help to bear, to be patient under persecution, or that she ran a hand along the muscle of her right arm testing its quality.

Rather there was intensified in her that slow itch of wrath which had swept away humility.

So she rode in silence with Provine's lascivious eyes upon her from behind, and Big Basford glowering in self-centered inattention ahead.

The way led close along the foot of Rainbow Cliff among the weathered debris which sifted

always down the rock face, and presently she was amazed to see the wall itself seem to slice in between Basford and herself, and in another second she was riding into a very narrow defile in the living stone with Provine close upon her horse's heels. There was just room for horse and rider in the echoing aisle and none to spare. It was dimly lighted by what seemed a crack in the earth's surface high up among the clouds. The girl looked up in wonder.

This, she knew, was the secret of Rainbow Cliff and Mystery Ridge. Despite her danger she noted the passage with keen interest. The way was short for in a few minutes the rock-walled cut turned sharply to the right and ended abruptly.

Before her startled vision lay spread out a little paradise, round as a cup, green with tender grass, dotted with oak and poplar trees beside its countless springs—and grazing contentedly on its peculiarly rank forage was a band of cattle, each one of which bore on its left the "B. K." of Bossick's brand!

But stranger than all this was the straight high wall of tinted stone which completely encircled the spot, with no opening other than the one through which she and her guard had entered.

This, then, was Rainbow's Pot of which Arnold had spoken.

In utter astonishment she drew Buckskin up and looked at the "secret spot" of Sky Line Ranch.

It was fair to the eye, the ear and the nostril, for the sunlight fell warm upon its farther side, the songs of a myriad birds made music in the trees and the still air was drenched with the scent of some nameless flower.

It was not until she had taken it all in with a slowly comprehensive glance that she became conscious of something strange in its formation, namely—the tendency of the green-clad floor to slope from all sides smoothly down to the center where there seemed to be a cave with an overhanging edge.

This slanting hole was dark in the midst of the green with the late light upon it, like the sinister entrance to some underground cavern.

"Well," said Provine amusedly, "how do you like it?"

The girl did not reply, but sat still with her hands crossed on her saddle horn.

The snaky eyes under the black brows lost their drowsy pleasantry.

"I wouldn't advise you, purty," he said, "to come the high-and-mighty with me. A little kindness, now, would go a long way towards an understandin'. Get off that horse."

Without a word Nance obeyed.

A little cold touch was at her inmost heart,

but that tight, tense feeling of strength was still with her. She measured Provine's shoulders with her eyes as he unsaddled the animals and turned them out to graze. She looked at his long arms, his lean and sinewy back.

"I've handled my plow all spring," she said to herself sagely, "I pitched hay all day and was not too tired at night. I can lift a grain sack easy. I'll sell out hard if I have to—for Mammy and Brand and Bud and Sonny."

And when Provine turned and come toward her, smiling, he was met by blue eyes that were hard as shining stone, a mouth like a line of battle and hands clutched hard on folded arms.

"Oh, ho," he said, "we're goin' to butt our head agin a wall, ain't we? Cut it, kid, an' kiss me—you might as well now as later. An' besides, I don't like a mouth all mashed up from discipline."

"The hand of God," said the big girl stiffly, "is before my face. His host is round about me. *I'd* advise *you* to let me alone."

The man threw back his head and laughed.

"I don't see no host," he said, "an' I ain't superstitious," and with a leap he swung one long arm around her neck.

"Help me, Lord!" said Nance aloud, and bowing her young body she pulled her forehead down his breast and slipped free.

Next moment she had struck him in the mouth

with all her might and followed through like any man.

Provine roared and swore and came for her again, head down and small eyes blazing.

"Now," he said, "I'll have to hand you discipline, you damned hell-cat!"

* * * * * * * *

So the night that was so full of portent dropped down upon the country of the Deep Heart hills and Destiny rode the winds.

Sky Line Ranch was stirring early, even before the first grey light had touched the east.

There was much afoot. Bossick's steers were going down the Pipe that day—and perhaps Sud Provine and Nance Allison would go with them, bound for the Big Bend country in Texas whence the man had hailed.

"I think she'll sign this morning," said Arnold easily as he sat down to Josefa's steaming breakfast by lamplight, "and keep her mouth shut, too."

In the shielding clump of pines Bossick waited for Fair's signal somewhere inside the cliff.

Not so far down the great slope of Mystery Rod Stone was climbing up with the Cordova men behind him and Minnie Pine like his shadow at his side.

And deep in the heart of the earth Brand Fair was slowly forging upward toward that

coup of justice for which he had labored so long and patiently.

There was excitement in him and exultation and a certain grim joy, for he knew the man he wanted was at Sky Line Ranch and that he was about to lay upon him and Kate Cathrew the stern hand of the law.

Not least of the actors in the coming play, set to function on the stage of Rainbow's Pot, was Bud Allison urging his exhausted horse slowly up toward Sky Line.

False dawn had come and passed. The short darkness following was shot now with pale light above the distant rim.

There was a cold breeze blowing when Arnold and Kate Cathrew rode along the rock face to the Flange. They spoke in low tones to Big Basford standing like an image and slipped into the wall. They rode in silence down the defile, dark as Erebus and full of wind, and came out into the amphitheatre where the pale light was breaking.

The trees stood like tall gnomes, humped and darkly draped.

Here and there on the sloping floor the cattle lay in quiet groups, while a little way apart Buckskin and Silvertip browsed industriously.

At first they saw no sign of anything human in all the shadowy place. Arnold's keen eyes

swept the Pot from side to side, while Cattle Kate's went slowly round the wall.

"That's funny," said the man, "Provine——"

"Look," said Kate, "over toward the left—against the cliff."

The light in the east struck first at the western face of the precipice, so that an object standing back against the perpendicular surface got its full benefit.

Arnold bent forward in his saddle and looked long at this object.

It was very still, a point of prominence in the shadows, and its very immobility gave it a certain grimness.

Then he touched his horse and rode forward.

"Good Lord!" he said as he pulled rein a distance from it, "Good Lord!"

For the object was Nance Allison—or what had been Nance Allison some few hours back.

Now it was a tragic wreck of a woman whose garments hung in fantastic shreds upon her body, whose white skin shone through in many places and whose great eyes gleamed from her ghastly face with awful light. One long gold braid of hair hung from her head in a dangling loop. The other was loose to its roots and swept in a ragged flag to her hip. Long wisps of it shone here and there upon the trampled grass around.

And over her from head to foot was blood—

blood in clots and streaks and splotches, while from a small gash on her temple a red stream slowly dripped.

The man was awed for once in his relentless life.

"Heaven!" he said, "what have you done? Where's Provine?"

"Dead, I hope," said Nance Allison dully.

Arnold struck his horse and dashed away, riding here and there as if he must know the ghastly finish quickly.

For a while it seemed that the man was gone entirely.

Then suddenly his horse shied from something moving in the deep grass by a spring and Arnold dismounted.

He had found Provine—Sud Provine rolling in agony, his face in the mud. With no gentle hand he grasped his shoulder and pulled him up.

"What's all this?" he rasped. "What's the matter with you?"

For answer Provine took his hands from the left side of his face and looked up at his master.

Arnold dropped him back with an oath, which Provine echoed.

"Gone!" he cried hoarsely, "gouged—slick an' clean! An' she tried to get 'em both—damn her hussy's soul!"

Arnold rode slowly back to where that grotesque caricature of a woman still stood by the wall. She seemed immovable as the rock itself, part and parcel of the waiting world and the grey shadows.

"You young hellion!" he gritted through his teeth. "you have blinded my best man!"

"Have so," said Nance, still in that dull voice, "yes—I have so." She nodded her dishevelled head.

"Oh, what's the use to fool with her!" cried Kate Cathrew furiously, "I'm done!"

With a flare of her unbridled temper she snatched her gun from its saddle-loops and flung it up.

As her finger curled on the trigger Arnold plunged his horse against Bluefire.

"No!" he cried as the report rang out clear and sharp in the thin air of dawn. The bullet struck with a vicious "phwit" ten feet above its mark, and a little rain of rock dust fell on Nance's hair.

From all the sides of Rainbow's Pot that shot came back in echoes, a roaring fusillade—and Bossick, waiting in his clump of pines, straightened in his saddle. He picked up his hanging rein and spoke in a low voice.

"Ready, men?" he asked, "then let's go."

Cattle Kate had fired her own signal of fate and her enemies heard it.

Brand Fair heard it in the strange dark passage far down in the heart of Mystery Ridge. Rod Stone, climbing the stiff slopes, heard it, and so did the boy on the staggering horse a little farther over toward Sky Line. He altered his course a bit toward the west.

"What do you mean?" said Arnold sharply, "would you kill her before she signs the paper? Or after—and have the finger of the law point at the new owner of the flats? Use your wits."

"I have," said Kate sullenly, "and have gotten nowhere. And she has defied me."

"She has defied us all," replied Arnold with reluctant admiration, "she has been charmed, it seems."

"Kill her—and the old woman will take the boy and go," said Kate, "she's the stubborn element. I warn you now—she must never go out of this place alive. She knows us now."

"Unless she goes down the Pipe with this morning's drive—the boys should soon be here to start."

"She will come back."

"Not if I send Basford to take her over the Line."

"Enough!" said Kate, "I'm uneasy about the whole thing—the brushed-out tracks at the mouth of the Pipe——"

"A trifle. And the boys will soon be here. Hark—they're coming now."

There was a sound in the rock face, a shout and the rumble of horses' feet hurrping.

The man and the woman looked that way—to behold Big Basford come boiling from the narrow opening with a string of men behind him. The grey light had given place to the rose of sunrise, and the riders who came so swiftly out of the wall were plainly visible.

"Hell's fire!" whispered Cattle Kate Cathrew.

Like a Nemesis, Bossick and the ranchers behind him pushed Big Basford down the sloping floor of Rainbow's Pot.

"A plant!" screamed the latter, "we're caught! We're caught!"

A hundred feet away Bossick stopped.

His angry eyes flashed over Arnold and the woman beside him, then scanned the green basin where the peaceful cattle lay.

"It would seem, Miss Cathrew," he said, "that you are—caught. Caught with the goods at last. Yonder are my missing steers if I can read my own brand. It looks like the B Bar K to me."

Kate Cathrew wet her lips and her hand moved restlessly on the rifle's butt. She did not speak, but her black eyes burned like coals in her chalk-white face.

Bossick threw back his coat. A star shone faintly in the light.

"You can thank Sheriff Selwood's tireless

work for this," he said, "and so can we. The whole country's deputized. Your work is known. You may as well give up without a fuss for we——"

He stopped, for an odd sound had become apparent—a deep, echoing sound, as of many waters beating on a hollow shore.

It seemed to come from the center of the amphitheatre where the cave mouth yawned.

For a second the whole group was silent.

Then Kate Cathrew flung round to stare with wide orbs at the mouth of the Pipe. Her world was falling about her and she was appalled.

The roar of waters became the rumble of hoofs and up from the bowels of the earth came Brand Fair and his men.

He blinked in the new light and then his dark eyes went unerringly to the face of the woman—this woman whom he had sought for two full years.

"Good morning, Katherine Fair," he said.

Far over by the rock face Nance Allison leaned forward in her bloody rags and raised a hand slowly to her throat.

The dullness in her clouded brain struggled with her natural keenness for mastery and lost.

Up from the abysmal depths of physical exhaustion which encompassed her came that spirit which had not yet been conquered.

"You!" screamed Cattle Kate, "You! You!

It was *you* who did the trick—not that fool Selwood! I might have guessed!"

Fair sat still and looked at her and at the man beside her whose face was a study.

"Sure you might have guessed," he said. "When you and your paramour there robbed the Consolidated and wound the coils of guilt around Jack Fair—you might have guessed that his brother would follow you to the ends of the earth to get you. And he's *got you*—got you dead to rights."

He, too, showed a deputy's star.

"Jack Fair died in prison—of shame and of a broken heart. For three years I worked in New York to get the goods on you, Arnold, and never could—definitely. Then I hired a better man who could—and did. I have a precious package in a safe place with enough proof in it to have sent you over long ago—but I wanted you both—together—a grand finale. It has been a long trail—long—for me—and for Sonny, the child whom you abandoned, Kate, five years ago."

The woman gasped and raised a clinched fist to let it fall in impotent rage. Fair went on.

"I've lived for months in Blue Stone Cañon. It was I who found where the willows *blow out* from the wall. It was Sheriff Selwood who took his life in his hand to help your men drive Bossick's steers into Rainbow Cliff. It was all of

us together, as you see us here, who put two and two together and determined to get you—and to get you good—you and all your outfit of rustlers—all of whom owe something to Lawrence Arnold yonder. We've picketed the mouth of your passage into Blue Stone and would have caught you there—or rather at Marston, where I have had arrangements made for some time. We've been holding off for Selwood's word—he's worked too faithfully all these years to lose the credit now."

Not once had Fair taken his eyes from Kate Cathrew's face, else he might have seen the tragic figure by the wall at the right, the grotesque woman whose blood-stained features worked with hysterical laughter.

"Brother!" whispered Nance Allison to herself, "it was his brother—not—not—himself! Oh. Lord, I—thank Thee!"

Neither did he see the newcomers streaming through the cut into the basin—the men from Cordova under Rod Stone.

Minnie Pine's black eyes went flashing round the Pot to light instantly upon the figure of the girl.

"Poor Eagle Eyes!" she said to Stone, "she has walked in hell!"

There was one other actor in the small drama whom no one noticed—Bud Allison, on foot now, since Big Dan stood at the base of the last rise,

completely done—Bud Allison dragging his lame foot wearily, his Pappy's old gun on his shoulder.

The boy stood between the last riders and the wall, looking at them all with puzzled eyes. Brand Fair continued:

"While we are about this we'll finish it completely. I want the men of Nameless and the Upper Country to know just what sort of criminals they have been dealing with—to know that Lawrence Arnold there is a clever New York lawyer who defends guilty men and frees them—by buying juries. That he is getting rich by selling through agents and aids the cattle which you, Kate, steal here, drive into the river, up to the cliff, down this wonderful underground passage into Blue Stone Cañon and out across the desert to Marston for the shipping. It has been an amazing system in a more amazing setting. The mystery of the steers that left no tracks is solved by the fact that every time you stole a big herd you drove them *up* the night before you drove your own brand *down*—therefore, they left no trace. Also, I want to say here and now before these witnesses, that all the money you brought with you into the Deep Heart hills belonged to poor Jack Fair, the father of your child—the man you betrayed into prison through the devilish legal trap laid by

Lawrence Arnold—and that is why I've followed you. Sonny Fair has a right to his father's property—and I intend to see that he gets it. Have you anything to say?"

Lawrence Arnold, trapped and conscious of the fact, wet his thin lips and glanced desperately around. He saw only stern faces, cold and angry eyes.

But Cattle Kate Cathrew was made of different stuff. She flung up her clenched fists and shook them at the clear skies where the rose of dawn was spreading.

"You ————!" she swore, "I always hated your narrow eyes and that mouth of yours! So *you* are the prospector, Smith, who has been so inquisitive at Cordova! It was you who shot Big Basford in the hand!"

Fair nodded.

"To see fair play," he said.

"And it is you who've done all this! Oh, damn your soul to hell!"

She dropped her hands, caught the rein hanging on Bluefire's neck, struck her heels to his flanks and quick as thought whirled him away toward the cut. The group between her and the entrance fell floundering apart before the stallion's charge.

With a dozen leaps she almost reached the wall.

"You can't get away with this, Brand Fair!" she screamed, "I'm a match for you!" and jerked at her rifle in its loops.

In her rage she was inept, so that the weapon caught, hindering her purpose for a moment.

But that purpose was clear to several in the intense group of watchers—to Rod Stone—to Fair himself—and to one other.

Nance Allison, standing in her trampled spot, knew that the moment she had dreaded for so long was come. Knew that danger threatened at last some one whom she loved—the stark danger of death—and as if something broke within her, the "stirrings" crystalized. Without taking her eyes from the frantic woman on the big blue horse, she began to feel with her foot for something in the grass—something long and dark and cold, but which seemed to her now more precious and to be desired than anything upon the earth—namely, Sud Provine's rifle.

It seemed, all suddenly, as if the feel of a gun in her hands had been with her from birth, as if she had leaped the years between and was a daughter of the feudal mountaineers who had marked her Pappy's line.

Gone was all the stern restraint, the earnest supplication to be kept from spilling blood. The hatred which had smouldered in her leaped to its fulfillment.

For herself and hers she had borne all things —lost hope and poverty, and the deadening weariness of gigantic labors.

She had believed in the hand of God that had been her shield and buckler, had been patient in adversity, meek in her dogged courage.

Now, as Kate Cathrew clawed for a weapon to kill Brand Fair sitting on his horse at the cave's mouth, she was become a killer herself, joying in the fact.

Her foot touched the rifle.

She bent and took it up.

As Cattle Kate straightened in her saddle, Nance dropped stiffly to her knee and raised the gun.

Her blue eyes caught the sights and drew down steadily upon the woman's heart.

Just so had those forgotten Allisons drawn down upon their enemies in the Kentucky hills.

Her finger touched the trigger.

And here the hand of destiny reached down—or was it the hand of God?—and ordered the puppets playing out their little tragedy in the heart of Rainbow Cliff.

As Kate Cathrew flung up her gun the furious rage that fired her stiffened body in the saddle, shot her bolt upright, standing in her stirrups.

Perhaps some unaccustomed pressure of her posture angered him—perhaps the excitement of the moment loosed something wild in his

hybrid heart—perhaps it was something else.

The bearded man from the Upper Country said afterwards it was.

At any rate, with the woman's spectacular and dramatic action, Bluefire, the stallion, who hated her but obeyed her, gave one scream and rose with her.

It was a magnificent leap, high spread-eagling, with the flowing silver cloud of his mane tossing in the rosy light.

From the peak of its arc the woman, good rider though she was, but taken by surprise, fell loose from her stirrups, cascading in a flare of booted feet straight down his hips and tail.

At the same moment two shots rang out—her own and Nance's both gone wild with Bluefire's interference.

Still on his hind feet, the stallion whirled, turning once more toward the cut in the wall, and came down—his shod forefeet full upon her breast. He leaped over her body and was gone, his empty saddle shining with its vanity of silver.

A silence of death fell for a moment in the peaceful Pot.

Then two men moved.

McKane, the trader who leaped from his horse and knelt by Kate Cathrew, and Big Basford who flung up his arms and shook his clawing fingers toward the western wall.

"You killed her!" he shrieked, "You yellow devil—you've killed Kate Cathrew! And I'll kill you!"

He kicked his horse viciously and shot forward.

Bud Allison, the boy whom none had noticed, raised his Pappy's gun and fired.

Big Basford toppled to the left and slid out of his saddle with an audible grunt. He rolled over, shook his good fist toward the serene skies, and was still.

Slowly the group drew in to look at Cattle Kate lying so quietly after the storm.

McKane was holding her hand between his own and murmuring foolish, endearing words. Lawrence Arnold pushed him aside with an oath.

But Brand Fair turned his eyes for the first time toward that farther wall. For a moment he did not recognize the creature which knelt there, the smoking rifle across its knee, its face covered with both hands.

Then something familiar in the drooping shoulders, the ragged veil of shining hair, struck home to him.

Without a word he went forward and dismounted.

Incredulously he stooped and took the hands away.

Wide eyed he looked at her.

"Nance!" he cried in horror, "Nance—Nance—Nance! God Almighty! What's this?"

"I am forsaken of my God," said the girl piteously, "I had to kill her—or she'd have killed you!"

"You didn't," said Fair sharply, "the stallion killed her. Your shot went wild."

She looked at him dully, uncomprehending, and Fair repeated his words. As she realized their import her lips began to quiver, she rolled down upon the trampled grass with her face to the sod, and wept.

Brand Fair, knowing that this matter was between her soul and its Maker, wisely did not attempt to comfort her.

He sat with his hand on her heaving shoulder and watched the tragic scene.

Bossick and his men surrounded Arnold. Big Basford was dead. And here was Nance Allison in Rainbow's Pot at dawn, ghastly with blood and weariness.

A thousand questions burned in his brain, but he waited.

From the right Rod Stone was coming forward, followed by the half-breed girl and the rest of the men from Cordova.

Bossick took Stone into custody and called to

Bud Allison who came limping forward, his blue eyes glittering with defiance.

Fair stooped and lifting Nance bodily carried her into the heart of the group.

"Men," he said, "here's something more to add to our score against Sky Line. Look!"

They looked in astonishment.

"Great Scott!" said Bossick wonderingly, "it's Miss Allison, ain't it? What's she doing here?"

"That's a question I'll ask Lawrence Arnold," said Fair in a voice like a blade, but the bearded man from the Upper Country spoke up promptly.

"I think young Stone and Minnie Pine can answer that, since that is why we're here. Speak, Stone."

The rider shook his head.

"Let Minnie," he said, "she was first to know about it."

All eyes turned to the Pomo girl, among those of Lawrence Arnold, still holding in his arms the body of Kate Cathrew, and they were cruel as a hawk's.

"I listened," said Minnie calmly, "I always listened when there was devil's talk at Sky Line. I've heard much. This time the Sun Woman yonder stood in the Inner Room where they had brought her, and gave back in their teeth the words of the Boss and the Master.

They wanted her to sign her mother's name to a paper which would give to Kate Cathrew the homestead on Nameless——''

''Great Scott!'' said Bossick again.

''She wouldn't,'' went on Minnie, ''and so they gave her to Sud Provine to keep all night in Rainbow's Pot, with Big Basford standing guard outside.''

There was the sound of an indrawn breath from Fair.

''We know Provine, Rod Stone and me,'' continued the girl, ''and so we went to Cordova for help to get her out. We had to wait so long to get away from Sky Line——''

''But they came, men,'' cut in the bearded man, ''don't forget that in the final settlement. They dared Arnold and Cattle Kate to save a woman's honor—and that's no small thing.''

''Shucks!'' said Stone disgustedly, ''what would any half-man do?''

Fair stood Nance upon her feet.

She raised her unspeakable head and glanced at the tense faces.

''Where's this Provine? Tell us, Nance,'' said Fair still in that thin, hard voice. He hitched his holster a little farther forward on his thigh.

''I don't know,'' she said. ''I tore his face to ribbons—I'd have killed him if I could. He crawled that way.''

She nodded toward the north.

Fair loosed her gently and was turning away, when Bossick caught his arm.

"Hold hard, Smith—Mr. Fair," he said, "not in your condition. Jermyn—go see what you can find. In the meantime—there's Big Basford. The boy was quick——"

Here Rod Stone broke in, speaking frankly.

"I'd like to say men, that when young Allison killed Big Basford he got the man who threw his father down Rainbow Cliff and stretched the rope that lamed *him*. John Allison had found the only outside way to the rim and was looking down into the Pot here, when Basford went to meet him."

For a long moment there was silence.

"It would seem to me," said Bossick slowly, "that there has been a deal of justice done here this day—a very great deal of justice. It's destiny."

Nance Allison looked up at him with a light in her blue eyes.

"It's the hand of God, Mr. Bossick," she said gravely, "no less."

The rancher nodded.

"Maybe," he said, as Jermyn and several others who had accompanied him, came back across the basin with Sud Provine among them.

One look at the man was sufficient.

"I guess he's had all that was coming to him for the present," said Bossick grimly.

"Take him along to the house. We'll go gather in the rest."

And so, in the full day, with the risen sun touching all the tapestried slopes of Mystery with gold, Cattle Kate Cathrew went back to her stronghold under the tinted cliff—went in state with a retinue behind her.

She had died as she had lived, spectacularly, and her turbulent soul should have been satisfied.

With her went one man who had loved her after his selfish fashion, another who would have crawled in the dust to kiss her feet, while a third, borne rolling limply on a saddle, followed after more closely than any other.

The young cowboy from the Upper Country absent-mindedly rolled a cigarette.

"She was worth it," he said softly to the bearded man beside him, "in spite of all!"

"Hell!" said the other, "look yonder! One square foot of his satin hide was worth her whole body! I always thought he'd get her, some time, some way. I'm going to dig up my last dollar an' buy him from whoever owns him now."

Bluefire stood against the cliff, watching with interested eyes this strange procession passing.

* * * * * * * *

Another spring was smiling on the Deep Heart hills.

On the broad slopes, the towering slants, the connifers sang their everlasting song, tuned by the little winds from the south.

White clouds sailed the vault above leading their shadows for a little space upon the soft green country.

On the wide brown flats by Nameless the young crops were springing, vigorous and safe, and some few herds browsed peacefully on the rugged range.

In the doorway of the cabin by the river, Nance Fair sat with Sonny in her lap, watching the slope beyond.

"Won't Brand be coming soon?" the child wanted to know. "The Rainbow Cliff is shining, so it's getting late."

"Soon—very soon, honey," said Nance smilingly, "I heard Dirk bark in the buck-brush yonder a little while ago."

In the room beyond Mrs. Allison rocked contentedly.

"Nance," she said, "you know this here carpet always makes me think of the floor of the woods, somehow, with its brown an' white. It's so fresh an' fair an' soft."

"That's why I got that warp," said Nance happily, "I felt it would—and it does so. Yes, it does so. Run, Sonny—yonder's Brand and Bud!"

Brand and Bud, riding up from the waters of

Nameless in the evening haze, Diamond and Buckskin drawing long breaths of satisfaction at the sight of home.

Nance rose and waited for the lean dark man who swung down and came to her with Sonny on his shoulder. As he stooped to lay his lips to hers he looked long and tenderly into her blue eyes.

"Heart of my heart!" he whispered.

"How's all, Brand?" called the mother as she spread a cloth on the scoured table preparatory to "feeding her men-folk" as she phrased it.

Brand Fair hung his hat on a nail and turned to the well as Bud came whistling up the path.

"Fine, Mammy," he called back, "everything at Sky Line's doing well. Rod and Minnie make things move, and I can trust them. The only thing that jars is old Josefa who never fails to tell me that all half-breeds are fools, and that white men can't be trusted. And then she bakes an extra pie for Rod and smiles at Minnie proudly. Yes—all's well. All's well on Nameless, eh, old-timer?"

And swinging the boy once more to his shoulder, he followed young Bud in across the sill.

THE END

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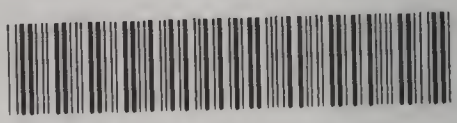

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